HORROR

SPLATTER PAINTING

SPLATTER PAINTING • PRESENTED BY VINEGAR ZINES • VICTOR HANNIBAL
STARRING BRIDGET HOFFMANN • A DOZEN PIGS • THE FOLKS OF CORDES

In Cordes, everyone knows about the massacre that happened thirty years ago. Everyone knows that the town's leading industrialist got greedy and accidentally poisoned the pig farm's water supply. Everyone knows he and his family paid the price when that pig farmer saw what had happened. And everyone knows not to go and fuck with the flame-licked ruins of the old farm today.

Since the murders, Cordes has been slowly dying.
This weekend, it's going to say goodbye to the 'slowly' part.

THE CAST

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THE CAST

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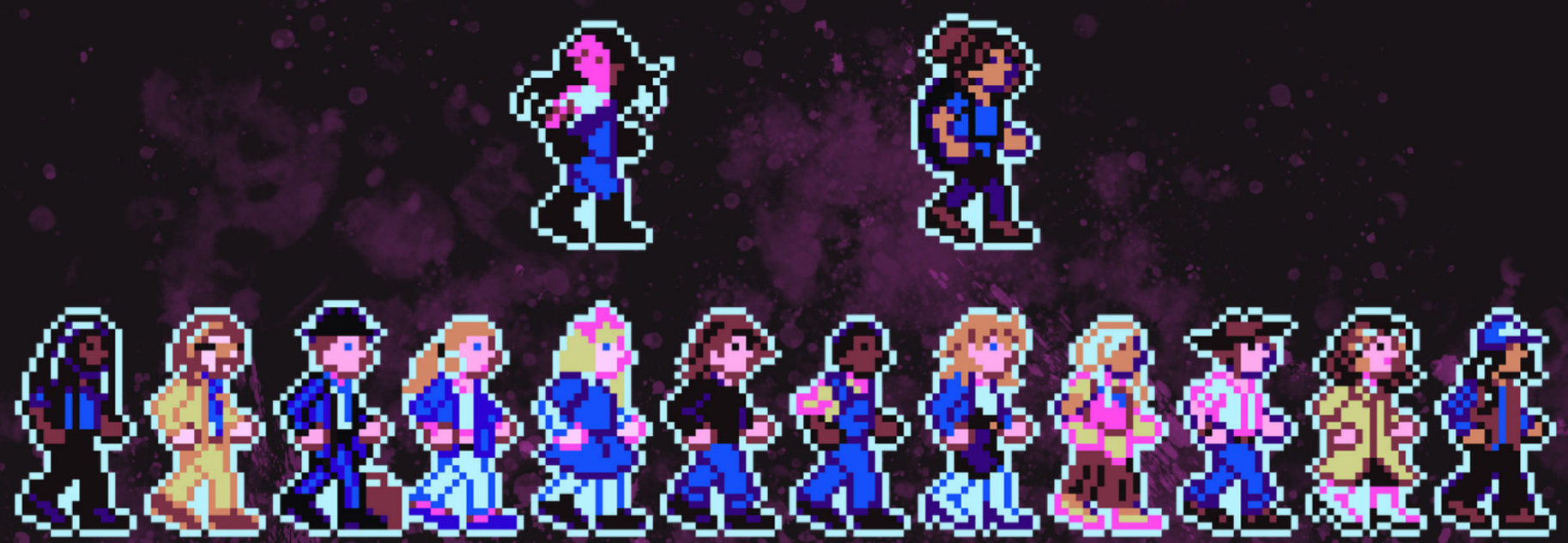
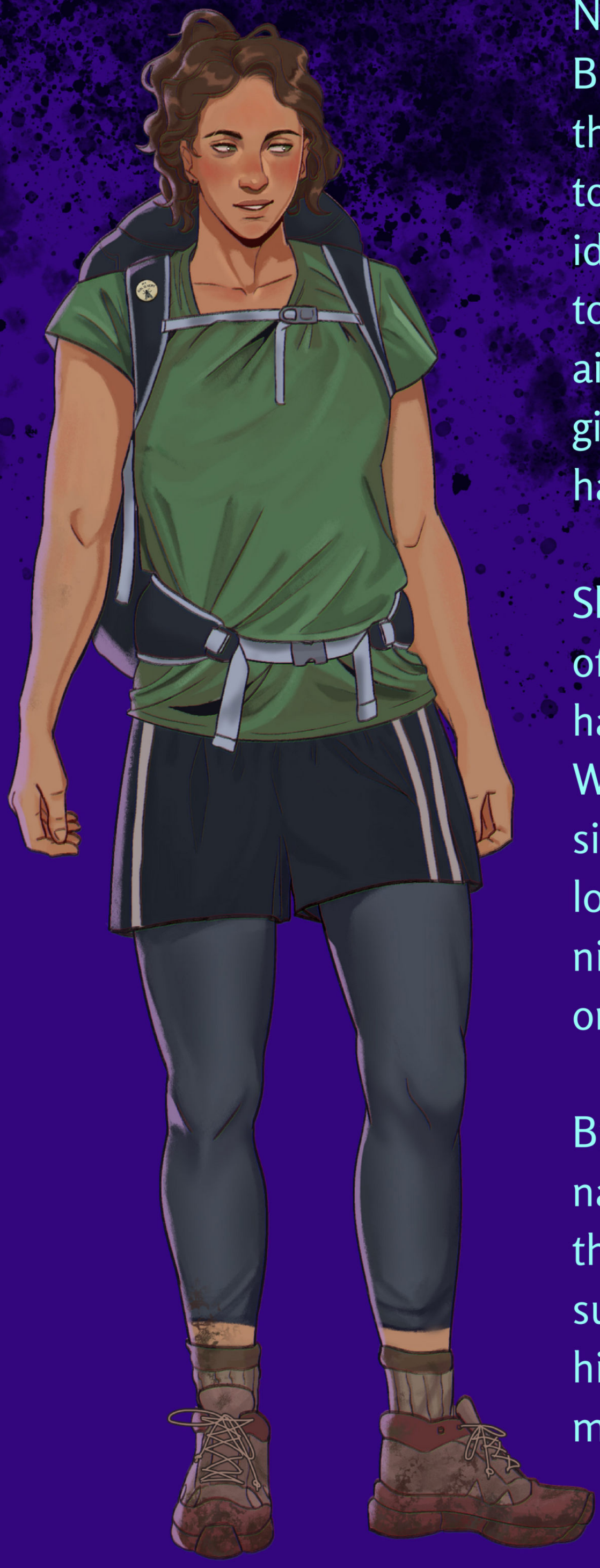
SATURDAY

LATE AFTERNOON



BROOKE FOSS is exhausted.



Now officially missing, Brooke Foss got lost hiking in the desert close to the small town of Cordes, and has no idea how to find her way back to base. It's been days of aimless wandering, and she's giving up on hoping for a happy ending.

She's out of water, she's out of food, and by now she's halfway out of her mind. What should have been a simple exploration of the local trails has turned into a nightmare. One that is sadly only just starting.

Brooke is not a Cordes native, and is unfamiliar with the unsavory stories surrounding the town's history. But don't worry! That might not be the case soon...

BROOKE FOSS

The desert was stiff and quiet and dark, and Brooke trudged through it all. She pulped mosquitoes against her bare arms, and counted the beads of sweat as they bled down her legs and dried on a barren riverbed of silt and stone. Somewhere, somehow, she had lost the trail. Had it been two, three days? Or three thousand? After a decade of blindly stumbling from couch to couch, from dream to dream, it all blurred together.

Brooke pressed her hands to the gaping cavern of her stomach. Had she shot past Cordes, or was it still up ahead? That little smudge on the map promised musty motel beds, overcooked eggs, and *water*. Fresh from the tap. She was convinced she'd kill for a glass.

Afternoon color spilled over the horizon. Brooke stopped to set up camp. As she dug her fingers under the heavy straps of her bag, she realized that she wasn't sure if she'd have the strength to start again. Wracked with exhaustion, dread simmering in her chest, Brooke pressed on for what felt like hours; the trees thinned, and the dry river path closed in around her leather boots. One foot after the other until the forest gave way to a collapsed fence, a stripped shed, and a row of low, rust-infested troughs. At the far end of the property stood a lone farmhouse, sunbleached and streaked with black scars.

Brooke stumbled over the broken fence and buckled over the side of the trough and dunked her face in the lukewarm murk. She gulped up as much as she could and then, reeling back, spat it all out. "Bleh." She tried and failed to rake the foul taste from her tongue. She slumped forward and stared into the rippling eyes of her reflection. She knew then that she would starve.

Something tugged at the hem of her pants. A little pig, jaw clenched around her leg, trying to gnaw through the fabric.

A velvet sun hung just above the treeline. Brooke sighed, shrugged the pack from her shoulders. Brooke seized the pig – a side of undercooked bacon to quell her lethal appetite – squeezed her fingers into its pink skin, bristles thick with old mud. It thrashed as she raised it to the sky, ready to crack its skull open against the metal edge of the trough; but the pig twisted and tore into Brooke's knuckle with its teeth. "Ah, fuck!" Brooke cursed and the pig wriggled free, scrambling across the enclosure.

She sucked the bite clean. The pig ducked through a gap in the pen gate. Brooke stood and swung herself over. Across the farm she ran, packing the dirt stiff beneath her boots. Always, hunger beating like a gong in her temple. Always gaining on the pig, who shrieked and squealed as if to ring the dinner bell. They swept together past the ruins of a silo, then bounded up the slope of a steep hill; atop its crest laid the shambled carcass of the barnhouse. Siding sloughed off the frame like old skin. Its wood burnt black with burst, white blisters.

In the front yard, half of a splintered sign faced the dirt road. It stretched across the dusty plains and, somewhere in the distance, fell off the edge of the Earth – off to Cordes. She'd never make it.

The pig wove around the back and slipped through a shattered basement window. Brooke dove to the cool dirt, and crawled through the moth-eaten screen. Jars clattered from the ledge as she leapt down into the cloying dark. Above, the house shifted and settled, as if unfamiliar with the presence of a person. Ash and mold and decay poured through her nose and pooled in the bottom of her lungs. Fat pigs with crisp, scorched skin lay heaped together in the corners. One hung from a hook in the ceiling, torn

at the stomach from the weight of its own death. Brooke gagged into her hand, but the pig – the little pig – found its hooves and clambered up a set of cement stairs. Brooke surged after it, boots sticking and unsticking to the shit streaked across the floor – up two, three stairs at a time – finally she lunged, screaming sweet victory.

A wet warmth oozed through her shirt. Brooke pressed up onto her slick, red forearms. She tried to stand, but slipped on the mess: a little pig, halfway crushed and splattered across the hallway. A little pig, face stretched in agony.

"*Screeee*!" A dead little pig started to shriek and writhe beneath her.

Brooke went to hold her mouth with sticky, red fingers. That only made it worse. She emptied out the last of her stomach – a thin mixture of bile and acid – onto a pair of dark, weathered boots that had planted themselves before her. Gloved hands hooked under her armpits and hoisted her up against the peeling wallpaper. Cords of dark hair, burnt, and soaked in ancient blood, dangled in Brooke's face.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. In those strong hands she felt like an animal. "Do you have anything else to eat?" It was all she could think of to say.

The butcher knife punched through her belly. Brooke flew back, hurtling down the stairs. Step by step, her tendons snapped, her joints ripped from their sockets, her bones split against the cement. She laid at the very bottom, a marionette with cut strings. She felt something gnawing at her dislocated leg.

The back half of a torn pig wriggled wildly on its hook. The front had slithered towards her, and was presently churning her calf into red paste. Soon, the rest were upon her – from the corners,

flooding down the stairs: a drove of burnt pigs awoken from their long sleep, just in time for breakfast. They pressed in from every angle, burying their blackened snouts into Brooke's flesh.

She watched the figure at the top of the stairs stoop down to the flattened piglet and plug its loosened entrails through the holes they had popped out from. It nuzzled up against the figure's boots, tottering down the hallway after it.

Brooke dragged her broken body through the tide of pressure, through the shit and the gore. She reached from the floor for the last strands of light in the open window. The mass of pigs forced her down, into a heap of glass – the jars she had shattered on her way in. Jars of peaches and pears and globs of wet jelly. She scooped handful after handful into her mouth. As the light faded to dark and the darkness dug into Brooke's skin, she split into her component parts, into dust and dirt. And even then, even with the gaping hole in her stomach, even when she was nothing but teeth split amongst a dozen pig stomachs, Brooke had never tasted fruit so sweet. Brooke had never felt so full.

SATURDAY

EVENING

ANTOINE BURGESS has art block.

Getting older hasn't dulled Antoine Burgess' memory of his friendship with a murdered boy. If anything, the years have only seen him stumble further down a tunnel of obsession, forever determined to do justice to his dead friend's memory. Forever unsatisfied with his attempts.

As an artist, Antoine has a unique ability to capture the emotion of that dark day thirty years ago, but even squatting in the house where it happened hasn't got him any closer to his goal. The self-deprecation of an artistic mind at work.

Sadly, there's someone else staggering towards town who recalls the murders, and is far less critical of their attempts to bring a bit of it back...

ANTOINE BURGESS

Antoine stood in the time-weathered kitchen, nostalgia prompting the shadow of a smile.

Marc's excitement had been infectious when his parents first bought this thing. The Andersons were the only family in Cordes rich enough to upgrade from an icebox to an actual, electricity-powered fridge. The adults made it their business to flaunt it, but Marc showing it to Antoine was always childish curiosity rather than smugness. He'd regularly pull the box open to share the magic of its ample space, loud hum, and cool air, holding it long enough for Mrs. Anderson to presumptuously scold Antoine for "wasting" their electricity.

Whatever had been left inside the fridge had decayed long enough that even the rotten smell was a distant memory. Antoine wasn't brave enough to chance opening it now.

Instead of taking the familiar path straight to Marc's second-floor studio, Antoine found himself making another memory-laden detour into the larger of the broken home's two living rooms. In the corner, half-hidden by a sheet, was the piano Mrs. Anderson bled out on thirty years ago. He pressed one of the blood-stained keys on a whim and eked out a pitiful wheeze.

Attempt #217, a subpar version of Harriet Anderson, had an angry slash in the canvas bisecting her delicately arched eyebrow. It lived now in the graveyard of Antoine's failed attempts in the Andersons' basement.

A thunderous *crack-BOOM* from the foyer shattered the silence. He froze, then scowled. Wouldn't be the first time some punk kids dared each other to break into the house. Probably wouldn't be the last.

He knew the stories they told and what they were after. A painting in the Murder Mansion, streaked with the blood of the Anderson patriarch after his throat was slashed by a vindictive pig farmer. The so-called "splatter painting", missing in action after the slaughter. Time and teenagers had warped Marc's final creation into a lurid scavenger hunt prize.

Antoine knew better. That bastard *Mayor* Derek Anderson wouldn't pony up to where he put the original. Probably squirreled it away somewhere and sold it to the highest bidder, knowing full well he could make a pretty penny for the tragedy-suffused work of his dead older brother. Karma would take him eventually.

Regressing into the shadows of the living room, Antoine squinted through moonlit gloom and considered his options. He also set down the cup of paintbrushes in his hand. After a momentary reassessment, he retrieved the brushes and left the cup. These things were expensive, dammit.

The unfinished #283 needed to be retrieved from upstairs, he couldn't risk these idiots seeing it and knowing they weren't alone. The foyer had three exits, and the stairs leading to the second floor. Trespassing kids usually went straight ahead, rather than left towards Antoine's current location. He'd creep past them to the stairs and –

Nevermind. They turned left. Just his luck.

Instead of sharp whispers and mischievous giggles, rumbling footfalls preceded the appearance of the solitary figure stalking from the entryway into the kitchen. Metallic groaning was the only warning for a *CRASH* suggesting a savage displacement of the fridge. The ensuing roar radiated a menace that took root in the husk of the Anderson mansion and gave it new, malevolent life. This was no punk kid.

#283. He had to get #283 and *get the hell out of there*.

Subsequent crashes hid the sound of him scurrying towards the foyer, but acidic terror still coated his tongue as he came in view of the kitchen. The intruder's hulking back was turned. Bloodied overalls promised violence if their paths crossed.

Antoine near-sprinted by the remains of the front doors *(just like #105, its wooden frame rent apart in frustrated rage at another failure)* and tiptoed upstairs. The penultimate stair, unfortunately, moaned in loud protest at his weight.

For a heartstopping moment, the destruction downstairs ceased. Then, heavyset footfalls thudded toward the stairs. Antoine fumbled in panic into the nearest room: Marc's.

The police said Marc's death was likely heroic. That he'd probably instructed his sister to hide in his closet after hearing their mother's screams downstairs and barricaded the two of them in his room. It did them little good. They'd found him in this exact spot, skull cleaved nearly in two and his hand stretched uselessly towards a baseball bat inches from his fingertips. Little Sadie's corpse was a nearly unrecognizable mess in Marc's closet.

#43 was a gouache study of Marc's buck-toothed grin with something salvageable in the messy crimson strokes comprising his dimpled cheeks. Antoine could barely look at the violent stain on the aged carpet in front of him, at how the streaks unintentionally mirrored his painted ones.

Life imitates art imitates death.

Grief loomed and threatened to choke him. The footsteps grew louder. Antoine smothered the pain for later dissection. Long-forgotten hide-and-seek tactics resurfaced, and he frantically scanned the room. The closet was too obvious, he wouldn't fit under the bed anymore...

...Well. Hiding in plain sight had always been his go-to in childhood.

He ripped the blanket from Marc's dusty bed and lay face up on the floor, refusing to think about how Marc had lain just like this. Antoine flung the blanket over his starfished body and intentionally left a foot exposed. It was a half-baked plan at best, and at worst the intruder would laugh right in his face before committing some unspeakable act against him.

The footsteps stopped in the open doorway. Antoine held his breath. The footsteps approached. Paused again. Wet, heavy breathing came from somewhere above him. Then, suddenly, a vicious kick to his shin. It took everything in him not to cry out.

The footsteps eventually moved away, stalking around, upending Marc's furniture and decades-untouched belongings with wordless grunts. Something heavy landed uncomfortably close to Antoine's head.

Finally, blessedly, they left. Air rushed into Antoine's lungs.

#283 was still out there.

The intruder was down the hall, throwing open the door to each room they encountered and ransacking it before moving on. They would almost certainly destroy the painting.

His hand tightened around the brushes still in his grip. So much for hanging onto them. He revisited his mental map of the floor, waited until his pursuer was at the far bathroom... and then flung the brushes as hard as he could around the corner. The intruder backtracked. Antoine swung a hard right out of Marc's room and dove into the opposite hall, directly into Marc's studio and –

There. Sitting serenely on Marc's easel was attempt #283, Antoine's current version of the ill-fated Anderson family portrait

that his friend had been so proudly creating before he was killed. It wasn't a perfect replica by any means, but it was the closest to justice he'd gotten in the past thirty years.

The studio – Mr. Anderson's study and eventual deathplace – looked just as it had when Antoine last felt nostalgic enough to journey upstairs. Relief momentarily cooled his panic, but it wasn't until Antoine's hands were on the painting that the presence behind him registered.

His screams, punctuated by the grunts of the intruder and the meaty thwacks of blade parting flesh, quickly petered out into pained wheezes and quiet sobbing.

He was left slumped over Mr. Anderson's desk, agony and severed muscle tissue rendering him immobile, with a rapidly fading view of #283. He initially mourned the fresh splashes of garish scarlet marring his work. Marc's work. He'd come so close... He'd...

...done it. Hadn't he?

Bright, cloying lifeblood streaked over underlying paint. An unfinished rendering of the Andersons. The ultimate recreation.

He hadn't *finished* Marc's final piece, but the splatter painting was no longer lost.

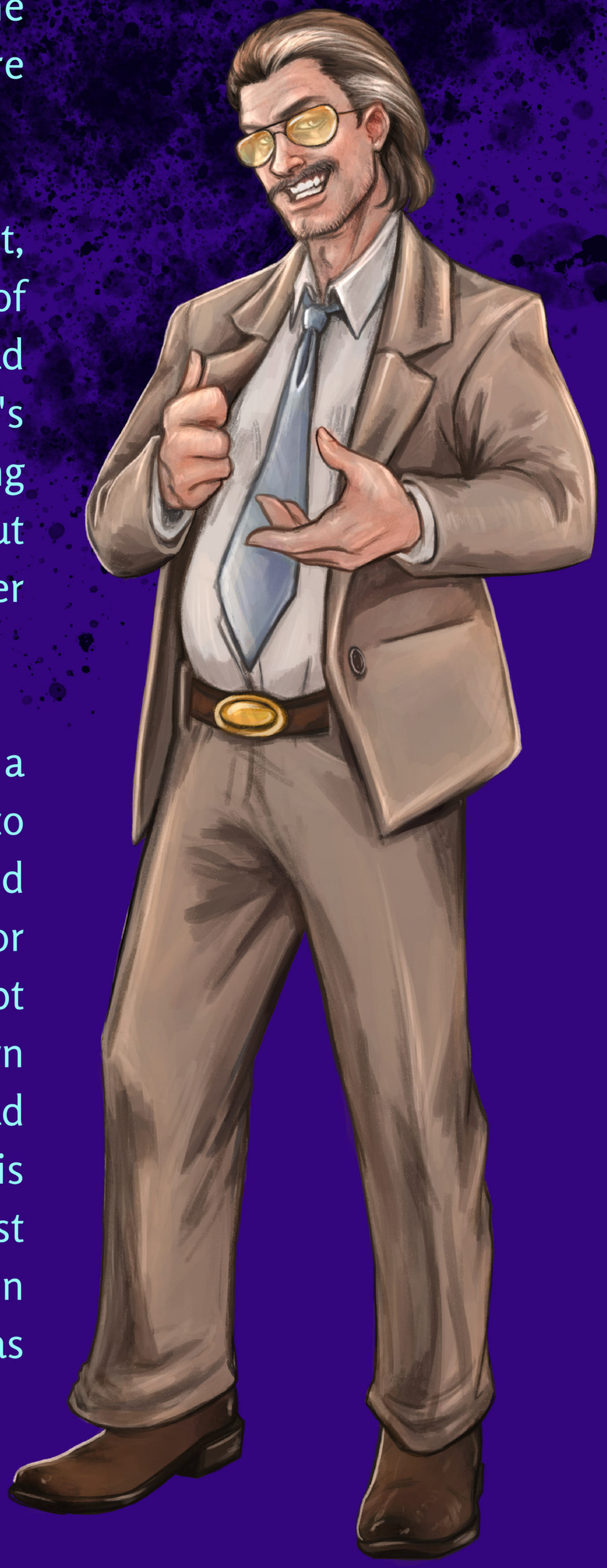
He smiled as his vision faded.

DEREK ANDERSON doesn't care.

The mayor of Cordes is the sole survivor of the massacre that took his family.

If he'd been there that night, he might feel some kind of pride in his survival, instead of the crushing guilt he's been left with due to being the only family member out of the house when a killer came to call.

Channelling his anger into a desire to turn Cordes into something modern and unrecognisable, Mayor Anderson is eager to accept corporate interests into town to bulldoze over the bad memories. Following in his father's industrialist footsteps and continuing in the spirit of work that has lain dormant since that day.



DEREK ANDERSON

Derek thought about death all the time. He'd done the therapy thing, took the prescribed 50mg of Prozac plus the occasional Prazosin when the nightmares got bad. Yet he still found himself waking up early to see the sunrises, trying to make his last thought, when it came, something that meant more than the final words he'd said to his Father when he dropped him off at summer camp all those years ago:

"Sure, Pop."

A whole lifetime finalised by two words, the context of which Derek never tried to recall anymore. Remembering had become a beast that lurked in the corner of Derek's mind, holding his thoughts hostage whenever he wasn't working; obsessively growing the empire his Father's death left him, cultivating it until it was a thing with sharpened branches and flourishing leaves watered with blood and tears.

It was hot in the Mayor's office that night, sweat pooling under the rims of Derek's glasses as he reclined in his office chair, mouthing the words of the speech he'd present to the press tomorrow after weeks of protesters banging on his door.

The shrill cry of the telephone made Derek jump, hand clapping down hard on the desk as he let out a groan.

"Christ, Elsie, what?"

"You missed dinner," his wife's resigned voice crackled through the speaker. Derek sighed, taking off his glasses and massaging away the first ebb of a headache.

"I'm busy."

"You're always busy, D. The kids want to know where their dad is,"

"I can't do shit for the kids if I don't complete this deal, Elsie. I'm putting food on their goddamn table,"

"Don't yell at me, Derek, you son of a bitch, I swear to G-,"

"Oh, fuck you."

If Elsie replied, Derek didn't hear it as he smacked the phone back into its cradle. He took a deep breath, trying to force his eyes to focus on the speech in front of him through the red haze of rage that was dimming his vision.

"Nobody understands the history of this place better than I," he read, "but we can't live in the shadow of tragedy forever. That's why I'm proud to announce that the Cordes Mall will be built. This is a moment of great progress fo-,"

Derek bit back another curse as the phone screamed again. His entire body flickered with rage as he grabbed it, smacking it straight back down. His mouth felt like it was filled with blood, teeth grinding in his jaw as his body trembled with the rage that had followed him since the night his family had been taken.

Once he got the campaigners off his back, Derek could sign the deal, and the land that had once caused him so much pain would be wiped away, forgotten under the unending *need* for consumerism.

He took a deep breath, picking up the crumpled speech and clearing his throat before resuming his terse recital, projecting his voice as if performing for the ghost of an audience.

He meandered aimlessly to the window, eyes falling on the uncanny yellowish tinge spilt out by the old streetlights, illuminating rolling suburban housing. His gaze moved beyond the houses, in the direction of the pig farm – the place that had driven that woman to murder his family while he slept soundly at

some cushy summer camp he'd begged to go to.

Staring silently over the town he thought he *must* have loved once, Derek became aware, suddenly, of a heavy step in the room behind him. The melancholy spilled out of him, chased away by the bubbling heat of rage. He spun on his heel to confront them, the "don't you know who I am" already blooming on his tongue like the head of a weed rooted in his throat. But as his eyes fell on his visitor, the words wilted as he choked on a shuddering gasp.

They didn't look like they had in the newspapers, but Derek knew them in a part of his soul he'd have sworn he didn't have anymore. The work boots and overalls singed and bloodied, the wooden pig sign melted into a scarred face, plasticky where it curled over an arched lip, revealing a set of blackened teeth.

"What the fuck are you?" he breathed, despite the part of him that knew the answer. "Why are you here?"

He knew that too. He could see the cleaver in their mangled hand, watched the light of a passing car flare along its rusted blade, illuminating fresh blood.

Time passed in a bubble as the once-human thing stepped towards him, weight shifting awkwardly under their clothes like their body was something foreign even to them. Derek took a shaky breath, lungs swelling with terror; and then all at once, the bubble burst. The intruder lunged forward, blade sweeping through the air as Derek, snapping out of his trance, bolted to the window. His hands fumbled with the sash, shaky fingers finding no purchase on the smooth frame. With a stiff screech that pumped relief through his veins, Derek slid the window upwards, hesitating for only a moment before thrusting his upper body into the cool night air.

It took him two thudding heartbeats to realise he wasn't falling.

His body was wedged in the window frame, evening breeze kissing his face from the front while the large, golden belt buckle affixed to his waist blocked any hope of freedom.

"Fuck, no, come on," he hissed, teeth gritted as he shoved his hips forward, trying to work himself free before –

Before the intruder reached him, breath sharp and raspy like the squeal of livestock as their blood-slick hand found his ankle. Derek couldn't even open his mouth to scream before his body was pulled backwards, stomach scraping over the edge of the window as the visitor grunted, gripping him close and submerging him in the sickly sweet stench of rotting flesh, battling the near-chemical odour of burning plastic, making his eyes water from disgust and terror in equal measure.

"Please, I have a family, I have kids, I'm a good man -"

His eyes fixed hazily to the wall that held the unfinished artwork of his brother, killed by the same hands holding a cleaver to his throat, forming beads of blood. The painting was framed ornately – an over-compensation for Derek not being there to protect his family when it mattered.

But he was making up for it now. The cleaver sliced across his throat, splintering sharp agony through his body. His knees buckled with pain and relief in a confusing dichotomy as he fell to the ground in a heap of shaking limbs and gasping breaths; the final mechanism of a dying survival instinct.

He lifted his arms limply off the floor, body shuffling forward like a slug in the summer sun as he tried to hoist his weight forward. By the time he heard the footsteps resume behind him, Derek didn't even have enough strength to look back. He could hear his own breath against the floor, the buzz of artificial light above his head, and those heavy, reverberating boot-steps crashing ever closer. Derek shut his eyes, bracing for impact as the intruder moved closer, leg brushing his foot as they approached – and then nothing.

They stepped over his body, not finding enough fight in him to even try and kill him twice.

"D-don't, I-I'm still-,"

He wanted to say he was still alive, still worth the fight, a thing worth mauling again just to make sure he wouldn't come back to haunt them. The killer didn't seem to hear him as they wiped the blade on their overalls, letting out a noise halfway between a snort and a grunt. They left the room, leaving Derek's body face-down in a growing pool of crimson that stained corporate white the colour of revenge.

The phone on the desk above Derek's body rang shrilly into the silence, and all he could do was listen to its final scream as he faded into the dark.

SATURDAY

LATE EVENING

“UNCLE” SAM HENDERSON is running.

The salesman can't show his face in all fifty states after his scams and product failures claimed fingers across the country. A known entity in the world of cheap kitchen knives and cheaper safety covers, Sam is trying to find a place to lay low until his commercials stop running and everyone forgets.

All the ill-gotten cash in the world won't keep Sam from facing the music if he's found, so he's had to look for somewhere quiet to kill time.

Cordes is a lot more rustic than he's used to, and his distaste for the tiny, dried up town will be hard to hide. Fortunately for him, he may not have to hide it for very long...

SAM HENDERSON

Cordes, Arizona. Pop: under 1,000, and falling. A town sleepwalking into the grave, with wind beating against tin shutters the beginning of the death rattle.

It hadn't been Sam Henderson's idea to stop here. The Cutlass had begun making its trademark whining rattle a little past Boyle, and by the time the turn-off for Cordes had shown it had been starting to sound like he had a rusty chainsaw hidden under the bonnet. So, he'd made the call, and turned in.

The station owner had been a man of few words; utterly uninterested in Sam's story. He'd grabbed a sample case, tried to cut him in on the Cutco scam. No dice. "Mister, I ain't interested," he'd said, and spat in the dirt. "All I want from you is forty bucks for the repair."

The second the Jackson twins had left his wallet, the car had been driven into the shed, and the weather-beaten old hick had suggested Sam take a hike. He'd left the station, gripping the sample case tight. You got all sorts of desperate folk out here in the boonies. Plus, there was always the chance that someone might recognise him, make the connection, and attempt to collect. Nine years of running from creditors had left Sam used to checking his corners.

The sunset spilled onto the streets, turning the dirt red. Sam had expected to find a diner or something such, but the place was a ghost town. Barely another living soul to be seen.

He'd ended up sheltering from the dry desert wind in the lee of an abandoned store, whose faded hoarding proclaimed it to have been GEIN'S FEED AND SEED. Sam's spirits briefly rose when he saw the cigarette machine by the door, but they were

quickly dashed - damn thing was busted. Sighing, he clicked open the case, ran his eyes over the shiny blades inside. Over fifteen inches of genuine American-made, Connecticut steel. (So he told the customer, anyway.) Was it worth busting one for a smoke?

Then, all of a sudden, Sam saw the woman. Standing on the sidewalk, her back to him. Long black hair like spiderwebs. He slicked back his hair, tightened up his smile.

"Well howdy, miss. Out awful late. Say, you in the market for a new knife? Who on God's green Earth *ain't*? And what if I told you this offer comes with an incredible deal—if it works out, you could get a slice -"

But tragically, Sam's pitch was cut short when the woman turned round, and he saw her face. Well, what was left of it.

"*Holy* -

The charred caricature of a pig's head leered out at him, fixing him to the spot like a sinner on Judgement Day. And before Sam had time to scream, the woman's arm whickered round, and all at once three feet of rusty steel sprouted from Sam's shoulder. He gasped as he felt it withdraw and the first skeins of red began to pour forth.

There was no pain - not at first. In his panic, he ran for the first place he could think, crashing against the doors like a fly against a window. They sagged, but didn't give, and he slammed his good shoulder furiously against them. With a crash, they gave way, and he tumbled into the darkness of the abandoned store, useless sunglasses flying from his face with a clatter. His shoulder roared and twinged.

There was no time to think. He tore into the darkness, praying that it would be enough to hide him from her view, even as he heard her crashing after him.

The shelves were bare. No cupboards, no place to hide. Weeping with fear, he ran through a small doorway, into a room that smelled of sawdust and vomit, and cast about desperately, looking for somewhere to hide himself. A stairway yawned upward into the blackness, and he threw himself toward it.

The stairs groaned audibly under his weight. Internally, he screamed, *Why me, Lord? Why are you testing me?*

He heard the maniac crashing up behind him, and the jolt of fear surged through his legs and made him fly the last few steps. Up here, the floor had been partly ripped out, and Sam skidded unsteadily to a halt as he took in the lurking hole before him, clocked the shattered panes that seemed to be the only way out of this.

"Mother..." he hissed under his breath. Began to edge, as fast as he dared, around the pit, feeling the wood creak and splinter, praying his feet would find no nails. Wincing at every sound the fraying floorboards made.

Miracle of miracles, he made it, and not a moment too soon. He saw her rear up like a serpent as she reached the top of the stairs, eyes deranged in her half-hidden face. The window panes shattered under his bootheel, and he lunged outward. He shuddered as the ground swam away below. Was it cowardice, or blood loss?

A snarl from behind him sealed the deal. He closed his eyes and leapt for his life.

The impact was solid, and not as bad as he'd feared. Didn't feel like anything was broken. Sam turned over. She was leaning out of the window, blade raised, screaming, a thwarted demon.

At once the tension broke, and the anger poured out of him as thick and hot as the blood still running in rivulets down his shirtsleeve.

"Fuck you, you God-damned monster!" Sam cried. "Hope they got a spot waiting for ya in Hell!"

He snatched up the sample-case from where it had fallen, clutching it to his chest, and made to triumphantly get the heck out of Dodge.

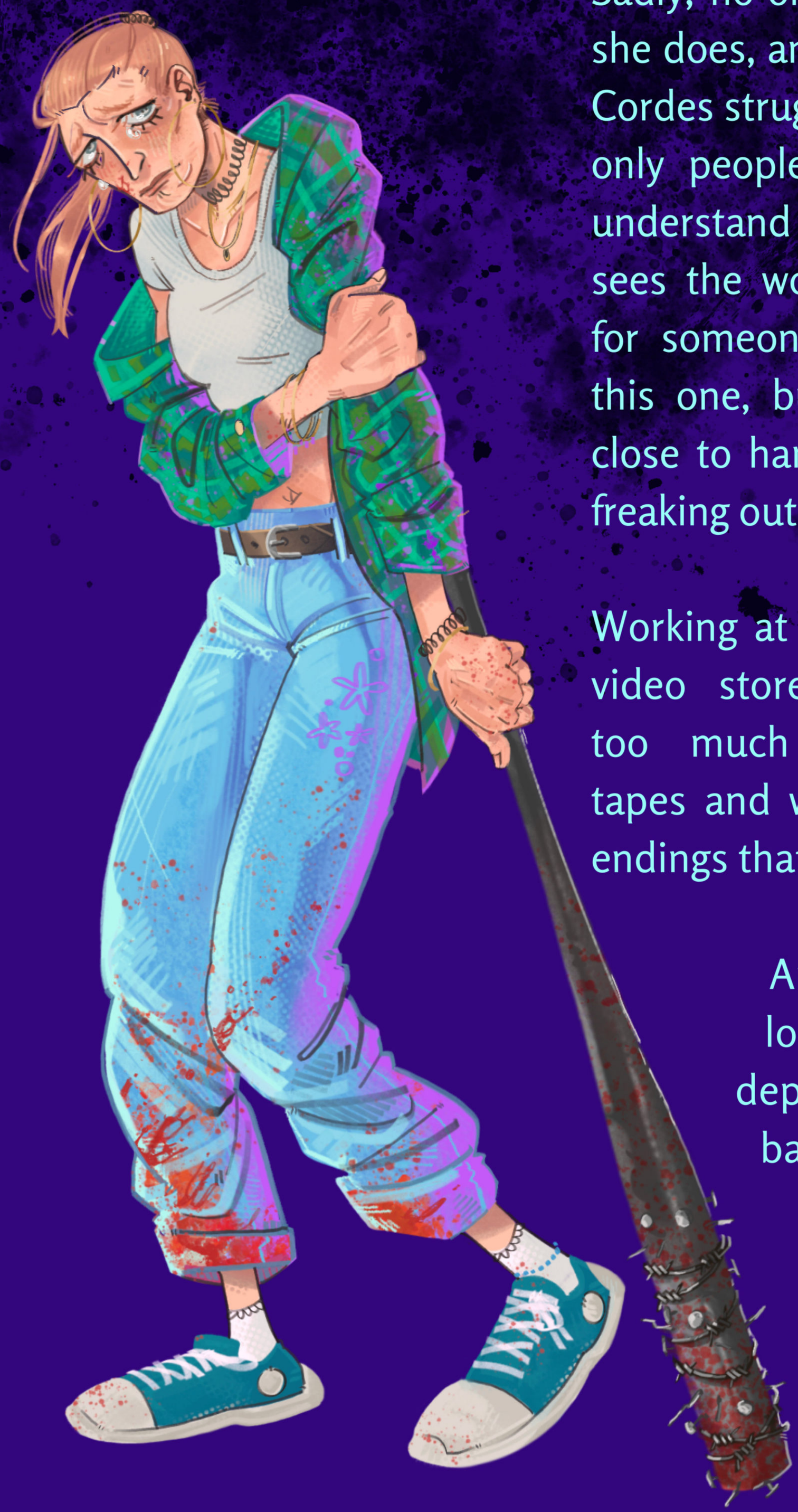
And all would have been well had it not been for a single, discarded board, left there as a hangover when the store was closed up. In his haste, Sam's careless foot landed square on the thing, and cracked it neatly down the middle. The impact, the sudden loss of stability, jarred him off balance, and with a shout he toppled forward. The sample-case hit the ground a fraction of a second before he did, and the cheap lock - which had mostly been for show - burst open.

Sadly for Sam, safety features hadn't factored into his budget. It was only a show case, after all.

Fifteen inches of genuine American-made, Connecticut steel sprang loose and buried itself in Sam Henderson's left ventricle. He coughed, misting the cheap pleather with crimson. The world blurred around the edges.

This time, there was no getting back up. He didn't even attempt it. He heard the killer's boots clattering through the dust, and had the good grace to know that his goose was cooked. Didn't stop him from screaming for all he was worth, cursing his rotten luck, wishing he'd taken his father's advice and made his Goddamn peace with the Lord. Sam went on in this vein right up until a heavy foot slammed into his back and the world went dark.

SARAH HUGHES sees things.



Sadly, no-one else sees what she does, and her standing in Cordes struggles as a result. If only people were willing to understand that the way she sees the world makes sense for someone in a town like this one, but keeping a bat close to hand has a habit of freaking out would-be friends.

Working at the strange local video store, Sarah spends too much time watching tapes and waiting for happy endings that aren't coming.

Are things going to look up soon? That depends on just how badly this paranoid girl wants to be right about things going bump in the night...

SARAH HUGHES

Cordes Crown Video had just gotten a new slasher movie in. Sarah's boss Steven had ordered a promotional for it, a towering cardboard cutout of the film's heroine, a young brunette with loose curls. Her mouth was stuck in a scream, blood splattered across her cheeks and nose, and she held a baseball bat—similar to Sarah's own—as if to strike an unseen killer.

When the tape had arrived, Sarah slipped it into her bag and devoured it after her dad went to sleep, only to discover the character on the promotional cutout wasn't a heroine at all; she was the first victim. Hours of rewatching and rewinding failed to reveal an ending where the girl lived.

Sarah spent her next shift staring into the cutout's frightened eyes, drumming on the counter to keep the shakes away. Her only customer had been Milly, the local boy who seemed to actually like her recommendations.

"I-it's a good movie." She picked at her over-sized hoops. "I think. Critics, um, don't really like it, but since you like Carpenter's other work, you'll probably enjoy it. I-I hope." She'd slid a copy of *The Thing* across the counter, and Milly had taken it eagerly with a shy smile, and that was the end of her only interaction that day.

But something still felt wrong. She chewed her thumbnail as she watched the clock above the entrance, willing it to strike seven so she could close up.

When it did, she heard the voice.

Help me, someone shrieked. *Something is coming.*

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut, gripping her bat tighter. "No. Everything will be fine."

HORROR!!

SPOOKERWEEN

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TURNS

MEMBERS

OVERDUE FEES

She began the long walk home.

By the time she made it back, the nails on her right hand were worn to nubs, and she'd chewed her gum to staleness. Her dad had left a message on the fridge saying he'd be gone overnight for a repair job, so it was just microwavable dinner for company. She poked three holes in the film with a knife, staring at the blade and wondering if it would be sharp enough to stop an intruder.

As the sun set, the shadows grew long, twisting themselves into monsters, some new, some more familiar. *Come out and play, won't you?* they said.

She ignored the voices and pulled all the curtains shut except for the ones in the kitchen, then sat by the window to watch the old farmlands.

The binoculars felt familiar in her hands. Comforting. With them, she could see the ruined barns, the overgrown grasses that covered empty fields. But the farm wasn't abandoned, not after what the townspeople had done to that woman. She'd heard the stories at school, passed down in whispers and playground rumors—when they weren't mocking her, of course.

"*Scary Sarah's fuckin' crazy. She'll beat your brains in with that baseball bat.*"

"*It was one time! It was an accident! I didn't—someone was following me.*"

Isaiah, the gas station owner who used to fix up her car, warned her about what he'd seen out there. Dad always complained that Isaiah shouldn't be telling ghost stories, but Sarah knew they weren't just stories. And after she'd driven past the farmlands one too many times and crashed while hyperventilating, her dad took the keys away forever.

They didn't talk about it. They were good at not talking. When

he was home, she pretended Mom hadn't walked out on them and their "fucking cow shit town" two years ago, and he pretended she had actual plans for the future. But he didn't know that she had her own purpose in life, and it was to keep the two of them safe. If she went away to college like everyone else, then no one could watch over the house and keep the monsters away.

Elbows propped on her knees, she watched the farms until she heard something shuffling outside the window. The binoculars tumbled to the floor, landing under a checkered tablecloth. Then she saw it and screamed.

What it was, she couldn't say—with its snout pressed to the glass, it certainly looked like a pig. But there was fluid oozing from its nostrils, dripping down a desiccated face, over patches of skin torn away to reveal flesh and bone. Rivulets of red blood poured from a detached eyeball. Neither of them moved.

There was a *bang* at the door, and a smoky smell.

"Oh God, oh God," she sobbed, tugging at her hair, pulling out a clump. "They're coming."

Her foot nudged the baseball bat, and she came back to herself.

She slung the bat over her shoulder, fighting unsteady legs as she braced her dad's favorite armchair against the front door. The second *bang* was like a battering ram. Her muscles ached as she struggled, pushing the chair to block the splitting wood and breaking locks. The ashy smell grew.

There was a moment of silence. Sarah exhaled.

Her next move was to secure the back door. She frantically stacked kitchen chairs in front of it.

Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. The voices taunted. A shadow grinned at her, sharp and wide and hungry. *Who do you think you are? You can't*

win. You'll never win.

"I will. You'll see," she gritted through clenched teeth. If she could just hold them off, then she could run.

Except the windows—she'd forgotten about the windows.

The killers, their cacophonous laugh deafened her.

The villain that finally emerged from the darkness of her clouded mind wasn't human. Maybe once, but not anymore. Stringy, matted lumps of hair covered charred skin and burnt wood shaped like a pig's head. Their overalls were covered in splattered blood, fabric ripped and torn everywhere. Thundering steps echoed on cheap tile. The butcher knife in their gloved hand glinted under fluorescent kitchen lights, and their breaths were like pig snorts, acrid and foul-smelling even from a distance.

Sarah raised her bat. She wouldn't be like the girl in the promotional. She would change the ending.

The bat made contact with an arm that was more like a brick wall, but it was enough to startle them into dropping their weapon. Sarah dove under their arm into the living room, dodging glass shards littering the carpet. Through the smashed window, where the farmlands loomed, smoke stacks billowed in the air.

A gloved hand touched the back of her neck. Leather fingertips ran across thin hairs.

Sarah turned just in time to face her attacker head on. To look into that one visible, soulless eye. To watch the curve of the knife taken from the block in the kitchen and follow its movement.

The knife plunged in.

For the first blessed, beautiful moment in her life, her mind quieted. There were no more shadows, only lights, blinding and heavenly.

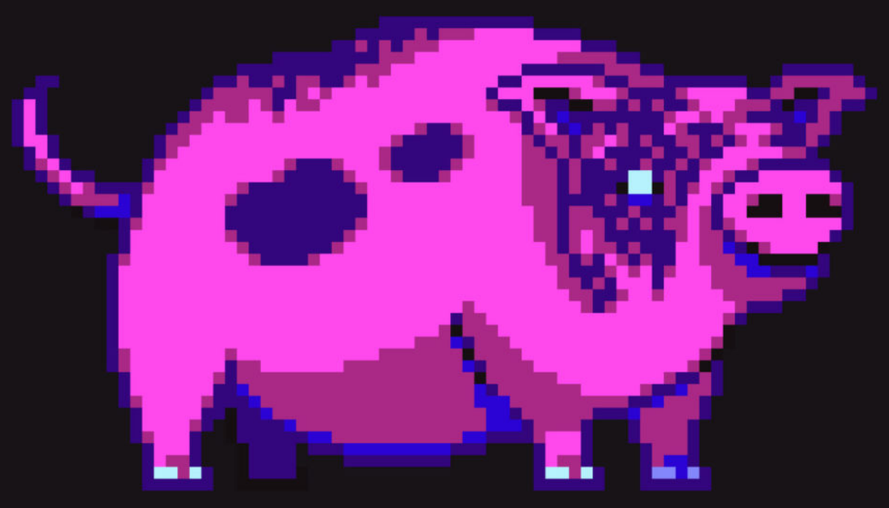
The creature tore the knife from her chest, then plunged it

back in. Again and again—through the heart, through the stomach, coiled intestines spilling onto the floor like discarded sausages, she thought hysterically, like spoiled deli meats. There she was, up on the chopping block and ripe for the slaughter. Like she'd always thought...

As if vindicating her, her assailant paused to retrieve the butcher's knife from where it had fallen. Made a clean swipe across her throat. Blood sprayed, and Sarah collapsed, choking.

Her laugh was bubbling blood, dripping down her chin, red seeping into the carpets. The world faded, and she thought to herself, to the things that had haunted her from birth,

You win.

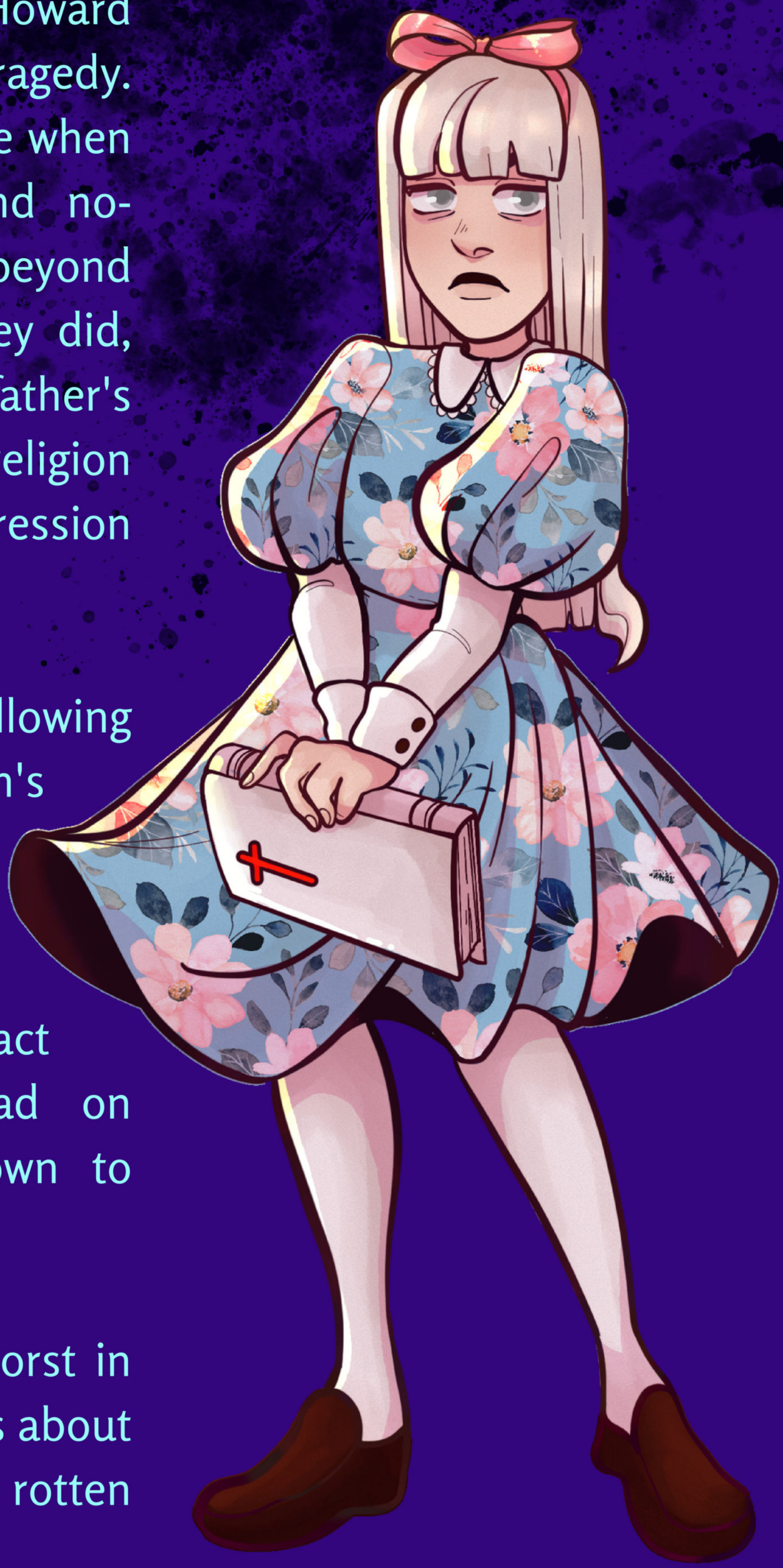


EMMELINE HOWARD hates sinners.

Daughter of a dead mother and a devoted minister, poor teenaged Emmeline Howard is the picture of tragedy. That's what people see when they look at her, and no-one's willing to look beyond the outer layer. If they did, they might notice her father's aggressive take on religion has left a lasting impression on the young girl.

Her mother's death following the events at Hoffmann's farm feel like a sad continuation of the town's worst hours. However, the true impact the events have had on Emmeline are unknown to outsiders.

A girl who sees the worst in everyone around her is about to meet the worst this rotten place has to offer...



EMMELINE HOWARD

From the front pew of her daddy's church, Emmeline screamed.

Emmeline Howard couldn't sleep most nights. When tossing and turning in her bed wasn't enough to calm her thundering thoughts, she found solace in the empty church. She'd sit with her ankles crossed, little white Bible in her lap, hands clasped together in prayer. God always took the time to listen to her no matter what time of day, but Emmeline cherished these late night prayers the most. This was when she felt closest to Him.

But tonight in her sanctuary, something darker crept in.

It started as a sizzle. Then smoke seeped into the corners of her vision. A rancid smell filled the air, and Emmeline thought *No, not tonight, please not tonight.* But like always, the scent made its presence known, and it demanded acknowledgement.

Burnt flesh. But Emmeline knew what it really was. *Rot.*

And inevitable as thunder after lightning, the scream ripped out of her.

Emmeline tore through the pews and out into the night. She ran past shuttered storefronts, rusted cars kept only for scrap metal, houses with faded For Sale signs. The number of empty properties grew by the year. God knew Cordes should not be standing, but none of the heathens in this rotted town would *listen* to Him.

Only when the burn in her lungs grew too strong to ignore did Emmeline stumble to a halt. She fell to her knees, chest heaving. Sweat plastered her white-blonde bangs to her forehead. This time of year, the heat was inescapable, even at night.

At such a late hour, the streets of Cordes were silent as a tomb.

If her daddy knew she was out, he'd get his belt. He didn't like her wandering. But what was the point in worrying? She was in Cordes, always in Cordes, never to leave Cordes. There was no punishment on Hell or Earth more fitting for her.

Behind her, the rot slithered through the cracks in the asphalt, lapping greedily at her heels. If only Emmeline was strong enough to purge it. She was weak. Powerless.

But He wasn't.

Emmeline put her hands together and bowed her head. "Dear God," she began, "First of all, thank you for helping me pass my geometry test. I was so nervous I'd get every question wrong, but you gave me strength." She allowed herself an extra moment of gratitude; that test was really hard. "I wish that was the only reason I needed to speak with you tonight. But it's getting worse."

Too many nights to count Emmeline had detailed to Him the corruption within this town and its burden on her. Perhaps the rot was her cross to bear, for she felt its presence. All the time. Like a carcass left out in the desert sun, it was impossible to ignore.

But people did. She'd stare unblinking at the older folks in Cordes, knowing that they knew she knew about the rot. They all pretended it wasn't there. As if that would erase it. Even Emmeline's godless classmates ignored it.

Her mom knew. Whatever happened that fateful night in the old barn, that night no one wanted to talk about, the rot first sprouted in the bedrock of Cordes. And her mom was there. Bearing witness.

"I know you have a plan," Emmeline said, "and I know you work in mysterious ways. So I'm begging you. Please, please, *please* destroy Cordes."

The last time Emmeline saw her mom alive, she took 8-year old Emmeline by the hand and led her to the old farmhouse. Emmeline would never forget the overpowering scent of gasoline as her mom doused two canisters over herself. The only time Emmeline's mom ever looked at peace was when she smiled and lit that match. Nobody ever told Emmeline what burnt flesh smelled like, but after that night, she didn't forget. Like mother, like daughter, her mom had chosen Emmeline to bear witness.

To a baptism by fire.

That was what this town really needed. A good and proper razing. Did the citizens of Babel pray in secret for the tower to come crashing down? Did they long to see it blotted from their skyline the way Emmeline longed for the end of Cordes?

"Cast down a- bring us a-"

As Emmeline stumbled over her words, her hands came undone and drifted into her lap. What could she pray for? Locusts? A great flood? Ten plagues upon the townsfolk? She could pick from dozens of retributions she'd highlighted in her Bible. But had God answered her prayers? Cordes was still standing.

Or.

Was Emmeline not asking God for the right thing?

Emmeline brought her hands together. She knew what she needed.

"An angel," she prayed. "God, send me an angel." And as "Amen," left her lips, a hysterical laugh pierced through the night.

Emmeline swung her head toward the noise. It had come from Scary Sarah's house. Had... God answered her prayers so quickly? She stood and approached the modest house. A gentle breeze nudged the front door open, not a single one of Sarah's four locks in place. Normally, Emmeline avoided the house, but tonight she could not take her eyes away.

An angel stood in the doorway, the lifeless body of Scary Sarah bleeding out on the carpet.

Emmeline smiled. "You came."

Lit from behind by the yellow light of the living room, the angel was majestic. Its skin was dry and leathery. An old signboard masked its true face, but Emmeline knew beneath that pig etching the angel was beautiful. It held a kitchen knife, the almighty tool still dripping with the blood of Sarah's sins.

Odd. Scary Sarah didn't look so scary anymore.

God had sent Cordes a true patron of the desert. Their savior. Sarah was only the genesis of its retribution. The angel would rain divine justice upon this town, and at long last the rot would be eradicated. Emmeline's chest clenched. Would it be enough? Cordes had shrugged off God's omens in the past. What was one more death? One more faithless casualty for them to ignore?

But a martyr...

"Use me." Emmeline was at the angel's feet, its humble servant. "I am yours to take." The angel was silent. Desperately,

Emmeline grasped the crusted edges of the angel's apron. "Please."

Take her body, for it was decaying. Take her blood, for it was tainted. Such material things didn't matter when Emmeline's soul belonged to God.

The angel tilted its head, studying her. Panic stabbed through Emmeline. Was she not worthy? Would the angel choose another for its crusade?

Then the angel lifted Emmeline to her feet. It brushed past, but Emmeline knew intrinsically that it wanted her to follow. So she did. Emmeline followed the angel through the empty streets like Isaac following Abraham to the sacrificial altar. She felt no fear, only serenity. Where was the angel guiding her? Would her mom be there, radiating the light of heaven? Would she take Emmeline in her arms and stroke her hair like she used to?

Would she finally apologize for leaving Emmeline behind?

But when they reached the old barn, it was empty. They stopped at the one wall still standing. The angel picked up a rusted nail as thick as Emmeline's pinkie finger. With its free hand, the angel grabbed Emmeline by her jaw. She only had a moment to register what was about to happen.

The angel brought the nail down.

Did Emmeline feel the pain? Oh, but of course. Like nothing she had ever experienced in her short life. She gave herself over to it, the way Joan of Arc gave herself over to the flames. This was why God created her, why her mom died, why this festering town was going to be cleansed. When the angel drove the second nail into her other palm, Emmeline no longer registered the pain.

For what was pain in the all-encompassing warmth of God's salvation?

SUNDAY

EARLY HOURS

MILLY BROADWOOD is in love.

Music super fan Milton Broadwood wouldn't say there's much he cares about more than the thrum of a good guitar riff, but there is one person even more important than a clean new recording of *The Cure*. Though, as far as he knows, she has no idea how high he holds her in his esteem.

Lost in his own world and completely immune to whatever situation is starting elsewhere in town, Milly knows the best way to express himself isn't in his own words, but the words of singers he admires. While he's focused on finally saying what he's been wanting to say since forever, nothing can drag him away. At least, that's what he believes...

MILLY BROADWOOD

Milly twirled the phone cord in his hand. “I don’t know, Kev.”

“Come on, man! The party’s at that Catholic school in the city, plus Micah’s going to be there, and we haven’t hung with him since his old man ran him out.”

“I’m so close to finishing this tape, just got one track left.” Milly sighed. Falling back on his penchant for mixtapes and mail-ordered records was an old and tired excuse.

“You’re just gonna veg out with your grandma instead of partying with hot college babes?”

“C’mon, Kev. You know I don’t care about that kinda thing.”

“Right, you’d rather sit around turning Japanese to pictures of Scary Sarah, you sicko.”

“That’s not even what that song’s about!” Milly was flustered but also frustrated that he’d already explained that David Fenton himself said the song’s meaning was innocent.

“Put that one on your mixtape so she knows you’re a total perv for her, then your tape’ll be done, and you can come party.” Somewhere within Kev’s voice was a desire to help his reclusive friend, especially with how obsessive Milly could get over his childhood crush.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” Milly mumbled through the rest of the conversation, his mind staying on the five-odd empty minutes ending the B side of the cassette in his stereo. Kev had to run on account of a pig breaking into his yard—the hazards of a tiny agrarian town like Cordes.

The radio never went off, just turned up or down as needed. Modern English sang “I Melt With You” softly to the empty room. It’d made track twelve. Milly was moderately embarrassed that he

fell for the same single as everyone else, having originally passed on *After the Snow*. But it was a love song that spoke to him, about sex and fatalism, mesh and lace.

This DJ swapped out for that DJ—Milly knew them all—and night fell sometime after "Lie To Me" (track lucky number seven). He playfully planned with some superstition, like putting "Love Will Tear Us Apart" as thirteen as a sort of *psych!* to the sentiment of the song. Milly would bemoan, on late nights such as these, that he only wished he could be so unlucky as to share a love with Sarah that could be torn so spectacularly apart.

An acrid stench of rot snuck into Milly's dream before he grumbled awake at his grandmother's shouting. This wasn't necessarily a rare occurrence—when the air was hot sandpaper all the time, nerves were often skinned raw. He rubbed at the cramp in his neck from sleeping with his chunky headphones on. His well-worn *Pornography* shirt stank with sweat from the desert heat, seemingly accounting for that sour hook in his nose.

It was early, but his grandmother often baked on Sunday mornings—for the church, of course, not him. Maybe the cherries were turning themselves into vile bucket wine. The stars still loomed low in the sky as "Halloween" (track four) by Siouxsie and the Banshees faded in. He'd been particularly pleased with the pick, hoping Sarah would remember insisting he watch the similarly named horror flick. The conversation may not have strayed from how Carpenter was really making a name for himself in horror, but it was the longest they'd talked to date. Milly cherished it, even if he squirmed every minute of the film itself.

Milly slipped an ear of his headphones back to eavesdrop on his grandmother's cantankerous barks from downstairs. Maybe yelling at the morning talk radio she loved to hate. The rickety

screen door squealed its rusty protest against being opened and then clattered stubbornly shut, but grandmother was still inside.

Milly crept past his doorframe, peeking down the stairs at whatever hapless solicitor was about to get his ear chewed off. From this angle, though, he only saw his grandmother red-faced with rage and a lump of dough on the kitchen table next to her rolling pin.

"...may not have been the one with the torch," Milly's grandmother spat, "but it was righteous what we did! By God above, I'd do it again." She was angry, Milly recognized that easily, but there was a tremor of fear in her voice. He knew her to fear nothing.

The visitor spoke too quietly for him to hear, a whisper like a snout snuffling in the mud. The air buzzed with crickets, and invisible insects danced anxiously on his goosebumped flesh. Milly craned his head around further, spying a mud-reddened glove reach from the unseen doorway, sprouting out of a stained and frayed flannel sleeve.

"You got what was coming, you old bitch," his grandmother said. "An eye for an-"

But the old woman only gurgled as the rolling pin was embedded in her skull, most of the length protruding from her rage-twisted face. A steady trail of blood streamed from the handle jutting from the wispy gray hair on the back of her head.

Milly threw himself backwards, slamming his door. Papers and dirty dishes flew off his desk as he dragged it across as a barricade. In the breadth of a second, he considered fainting or throwing up or screaming or crying. "My Heart, Your Heart" by Translator was already past the three minute mark, signalling the imminent end of side A. Pigs chewed, wet and sloppy, a floor below.

The cassette stopped, the stereo clicked, and the semi-local FM station took over. Milly scrambled to his window and jerked it open. It always caught a few inches up, enough for a dusty breeze against the desert heat but not for an escape. He could hear the heavy boots clunk below.

"...Quite a treat for you today, folks. Doctor Jack Rabbit here to cure what ails you," the radio babbled to itself. "And the medicine is a tasty early recording not even officially released yet. The Smiths are working on a new album!"

Milly froze and stared at the radio. He didn't have a track from The Smiths yet—he was still saving up his meager after school earnings for *Meat is Murder*.

"...the track's called 'There is a Light That Never Goes Out' and, let me tell ya folks, it's to die for." As the DJ prattled on, Milly flipped the cassette and set it to the lingering vacancy. This is it, track sixteen. Even as filthy metal drug along washed-out wallpaper, he was sure of it. "Listen up, Doctor's orders! It's The Smiths coming at you on K-U-R-S, Curse FM." Milly hit record and let the song play.

As Morissey crooned about love and death and the mournfully optimistic guitar drove into him like a double-decker bus, Milly knew that once Sarah had listened through her whole cassette, he would be brave enough to say, "I love you, I've always loved you, I love your nightmares and how you have a matching film for each, I rent them all so I can have more of you inside my head and my heart, and I want you to have these songs in yours because I'll be there too."

Those boots finally clodded up the stairs as The Smiths tapered off and tears streamed over Milly's cheeks. The lid of his marker rolled away, lost, and he popped the cassette out. He

jammed his finger into the sprocket, rewinding the last few seconds his stereo always missed, and the blade of a butcher knife splintered the thin particle board of his bedroom door.

He finished it: a mixtape for Sarah, for himself, and he cried and he smiled. Maybe she'll find it, he thought as the door smashed in.

Laying lonely on the dingy gray carpet of the upstairs bedroom, the blood-spattered cassette tape read "For Sarah."

ISAIAH PATRICKS warned everyone.

A childhood dare dragged Isaiah Patricks to the burnt farm outside of town, and he's never been the same person since. The flash of what he saw there, even if no-one believes him, was enough to upset his sense of security for good. If only people would listen when he tried to explain it to them, then Cordes might not be facing such a dangerous situation on this oppressive Saturday night.

Running the solitary gas station for miles means Isaiah is a fixture in Cordes. He watches everyone come and go, and is for many a last lingering sight before shooting off into the desert. As midnight passes, it might be time for Isaiah to face his own final look at the town that so often ignored him...

ISAIAH PATRICKS

Weighed down by dread, Isaiah lurched along the pockmarked road, drawn forward by the growing volume of an angry, frightened crowd.

He had to tell people what he had seen. He had to warn them.

The townsfolk were up in arms, surrounding the mayor's office where the mayor's wife and sheriff stood. They did their best to calm the crowd, but they were severely outnumbered. Isaiah attempted to push his way through and get up front, but nobody would budge. Circling around, he bumped into Cordelia and asked her what the hell was happening.

"Reverend Howard's girl, she..." her voice shook, so she swallowed and tried again. "She was found nailed to the wall of her father's barn, like Jesus to the cross."

Isaiah felt his gut twist at the thought.

"Lord..."

"And the mayor," Cordelia continued. "He-"

"Everyone please!" The sheriff's voice thundered above them, cutting her off. "I understand what's happened is horrible, but it's bein' looked into! There's no need for panic!"

The crowd erupted into an uproar so loud Isaiah flinched, voices intermingling until you couldn't tell who was screaming what.

"A little girl died, and you're tellin' us not to panic?!"

"What about the phone lines not workin'?!"

"The hell are you doin'?!" Isaiah heard Carmen ask, somewhere to his left. He made his way through the crowd towards her. She caught his eye and reached out to pull him to her side.

The sheriff grimaced. "It's all bein' looked into-"

"That ain't all!" Isaiah, standing tall next to Carmen, roared. The crowd quieted and turned to him. "The power, the pumps, and the cars at my place, they all been damaged! Power's cut off, too!" The people began to murmur and shout about similar experiences.

"And I know who done it! I saw 'em, I saw 'em leavin' last night!"

"Who?"

Isaiah took a deep breath. "It was Hoffman! The specter of the pig farm!"

The silence stretched on for what felt like an eternity.

"What in God's name are you talking about?" came a voice from the crowd. Isaiah cut them off.

"I know what I saw! I saw their pig mask, I saw how their body was all burnt 'n twisted. I saw 'em! They've finally come to exact their revenge on us!"

"Isaiah," Carmen grunted in warning.

"Mister Patricks, this is no time for ghost stories!" The mayor's wife admonished him.

Thirty years ago, when he first saw the specter, nobody believed him. They had to believe him now.

His anger grew and he snapped, "Your husband's ta blame! If he hadn't let this town fall ta- ta debauchery and shame, this wouldn't've happened!"

Her face glowed red with rage. "Listen here, Mister Patricks-"

"No! Ya have ta believe me! It was Hoffman! I know it! They finally got tired of us fuckin' with their farm, of the perpetual sin, and they-"

"Isaiah." Carmen gripped his arm. Hard. "Enough."

"God, I knew the old bastard was paranoid, but I didn't think it was like this," someone muttered loudly.

“The fuck kinda crazy is this guy spewin’?”

“Ya have ta believe me!” Isaiah yanked his arm free from Carmen’s grasp and stepped forward, desperate. “Please. I know you’ve all seen the farm. I know ya know it’s real!”

Silence. The ones he knew since childhood wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“There’s nothin’ on that farm but decades old cinders and rotten wood,” Carmen finally grumbled.

“And disgrace,” someone spat. “We should’ve torn it down years ago.”

The crowd began to murmur again. Most called Isaiah crazy. A paranoid old man. Everything his mama was scared of him becoming because nobody would ever believe him. Then, they all turned away, going back to yelling.

Isaiah clenched his fist. His chest heaved and his nostrils flared with every breath. Without another word, he turned on his heel to force his way through the crowd. He didn’t get more than a few feet before he felt a hand grip his wrist.

“Isaiah-” Carmen began to say, but he pulled out of her hold and rounded on her, enraged and betrayed.

“I’ll show ya! I’ll prove it to y’all!”

Carmen tried to restrain him again, but he maneuvered out of her reach. He glared daggers at the woman he considered his one and only friend, the only person he could trust in this god-forsaken town.

But she was just like the rest of them.

“I’ll prove it,” he repeated, quieter.

She said nothing. He turned and walked away, his nails digging into his palms. He felt Carmen’s eyes on him all the way back to his station.

The dread that had plagued him since last night - his whole life - gave way to anger.

They would believe him, one way or another.

Isaiah entered the garage. It was dark and reeked of oil and transmission fluid, but the faint light coming through the small slatted windows along the far wall allowed him to spot boot prints. He followed them to one of the garage doors, the bottom of which was dented slightly - dents in the shape of fingers.

Swallowing down his rising nerves, Isaiah circled around the garage and found where the boot prints led away. He followed, but as he walked alongside them, his anger quickly turned to fear. Because the trail led right to his house.

It had followed him home.

The tall grass to the right of his house rustled. Something grunted, sounding like a mix between human and pig. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and a chill ran down his spine.

It didn't leave. It was still watching him.

As quick as his legs would allow him, Isaiah darted inside his house, the screen door banging shut behind him. Unsteady, he made his way to the coat closet in the hall, flinging the door open and pushing clothes aside to reach the gun safe in the back. His fingers flicked the combination despite their shakiness, and deftly loaded the shotgun. The weight of it settled his nerves slightly.

With newfound bravery, Isaiah stepped back out onto his porch, cocked the gun, and gazed out across the field. He couldn't see anything, but he knew the specter was out there.

"I know you're out there watchin', ya damned pig sonofabitch! Ya twisted piece of shit! Ya-!"

Isaiah heard the footsteps behind him too late. He only just managed to turn halfway around when the muzzle of the gun was gripped by a single hand, bent, and yanked out of his hold. He pitched forward with a shout, which quickly became a scream as something sharp drove into the soft flesh of his stomach. He looked down to see a knife buried to the hilt in his gut.

Without warning, the knife was yanked back out, and he screamed again. Left unsteady by the nauseating pain, Isaiah felt himself tumbling to the ground. But a hand caught him, seizing his throat, and lifted him back up until just the tips of his boots brushed against the ground.

Squirming and choking and spitting up blood, Isaiah gripped his killer's wrist and gazed down at them. One eye, wild and bloodshot, peered at him from behind broken wood and a mess of stringy black hair.

The grip on his throat tightened as the specter lifted the knife once more.

"No!" Isaiah managed to choke out, weakly wriggling in their grasp. "N-no! N-"

The knife was buried in his gut again. And again. And again. He might've been stabbed more times after that, but he stopped feeling it after the third.

All he could feel was numbness spreading from his abdomen to his limbs, the blood bubbling past his lips, how his body hit the porch floor when Hoffman dropped him. But he couldn't feel them step over him and walk away.

Isaiah couldn't tell when his last breath rattled out, punctuated by bubbles of thick blood and spit. He couldn't comprehend the colors around him fading to gray. He couldn't understand when the darkness finally closed over him like earth over a grave, burying him.

SUNDAY

EARLY MORNING

HANNAH SACKLER smells a story.

A journalist on the rise with every intention of reaching the top, Hannah Sackler senses she's on the verge of something big. The two-bit town she's come across has a nasty past, and exposing it to her audience is going to net her a real slice of fame. Even if the subject matter is off-putting for squeamish Hannah, this opportunity is too good to ignore.

Rolling into Cordes with a notepad full of context on historical deaths, she expects to see the dusty skeletons of a story that's already happened, not a horror movie in full swing. Unaware and unprepared, she's about to find out how it feels to go from behind the camera to center stage...

HANNAH SACKLER

Hannah had never particularly cared for horror stories.

Her girlfriend thought it was weird, because she was an adrenaline junkie otherwise, but Hannah shrugged it off. So what if she never got through *The Shining*? She had enough creepy men in her real life, thanks.

All that being said, fear *sells*, and her last segment, where she'd explored some abandoned office buildings, had effectively put her on the map. She was well towards making a brand for herself in exploring 'haunted' houses no one else wanted to touch, and if that was what it took to turn her into a regular at the station, then that's what she'd do. Even if it took her all the way out to Cordes.

Hannah had done some research on the area before coming out here, of course. What she saw was pretty nasty—polluted water supply, murders turning into riots and arson, animals killed just to spite the neighbors. She'd seen more than one pig carcass on her drive into town, their bodies popping open in the heat that had already started to creep its way through the low shrubs and reaching cacti.

"At least the sunrise is pretty," she muttered, checking her tape recorder as she attached it to her shirt. Most of what she was recording now probably wouldn't be used in the final broadcast, but she liked having her live reactions on tape. It helped with authenticity later on.

In the angled sun, the Hoffmann farm was surprisingly ordinary. The boards of the porch whined as Hannah stomped her way to the door, which opened softly as she touched her fingers to it, casting the entry in a golden light that sent her coughing on dust motes.

The house looked—untouched.

That wasn't quite right. The house looked like a museum, some frozen image of the woman that used to live here. There—three pairs of muddied boots. There—a mug overturned in a drying rack. There—a wall covered in paintings and photographs, faded by the sun.

"This is freaky," she muttered, voice low despite the fact that she knew it wouldn't make good audio. From where she still stood in the doorway, she could turn and see over her shoulder the shattered remains of the buildings that had burned, and how they looked like a portal into a world entirely different from this groaning house and needlework pillows.

The last place hadn't been like this. Two decades empty left a building with dust and animals, leaks and squatters. She ran a finger along the edge of a table, just to check. It came up clean.

She took the camera out of her pocket and snapped a few photos for later reference, the wheeze of the disposable shutter sharp in the still air. The whole place felt like a held breath, just waiting for its mistress to come home. Hannah still didn't believe in ghosts, but this moment made her understand people that did—this house stood like a living imprint of someone's life.

Hannah stumbled back down the porch. "There's nothing in there, anyway," she reasoned to herself. You could see practically the entire house from the door. No reason to walk around, feeling the whole time like she was trampling over someone's grave.

On the right side of the house was a cellar. A chain dangled to one side, and despite the stillness of the morning, a breeze rattled it, bells like a gate opening. The handles had rusted, staining her fingerprints red.

The cellar opened like an exhale.

One thing that stuck out to her among her research was the fact that Bridget Hoffmann's body was never discovered. In the end, the police concluded that the pigs must've eaten her; the sty was covered in blood, and it was weeks before they'd done a thorough sweep of the property, in all the chaos. Pigs'll eat anything, and no one was left to take care of them, after Bridget burned. Maybe they even ate her first, as one final kindness.

It took Hannah an awful, terrible second to realize how wrong the cops had gotten it.

In the cellar of the Hoffmann house, a weak lightbulb swung from a string, illuminating crooked skeletons hung on hooks, awaiting the butcher. The whole floor glistened in the light like a bottomless pool, colored black without the sun. The smell of iron, though, choked her tight enough to tell her it wasn't water down there.

Even in the low light, it was enough for her to see one of the faces.

She'd gotten fliers even in the next town over, about a woman her age who'd gone missing while on a hike. Hannah remembered thinking she wouldn't be caught dead hiking alone, not the least because you never knew what was out there. And here, in this blood-soaked cellar, Hannah recognized this body as a girl who would never get to go home again.

A sound climbed its way out of her throat. "What the fuck?" she tried to say, unable to get out anything but a thin, choked sound. "What the actual fuck?"

The cellar door slammed.

It sent her tumbling down. A bruise that would run all the way up her back, she was sure, if she managed to live long enough.

The amber light was next to useless, only coated her vision in the blood she was spitting out, the blood that was soaking her hands and shirt and jeans. She spun, looking for the door—

Bridget Hoffmann was said to be a tall woman. Hannah herself was tall, particularly in the platforms she preferred, but she didn't have the shoulders, the strength, to turn that height into anything intimidating.

The—the *thing* in front of her did, though. Despite the hunch in their shoulders, the lean created by the weight of a heavy cleaver, Hannah could see the breadth created by decades of labor. Her own breaths were loud in her skull, and besides that, all she could hear was the blood lapping a drain somewhere deeper into the cellar and a thin, snapping sound—something between the pop of a joint and the crack of a wood log collapsing in a campfire.

"You aren't real," Hannah said. Her hand flew up to her collar, where her recorder should be, but it must've fallen when she did. It was in the pool somewhere beneath her, blood seeping through the cracks and coating the ribbon. For a heartbeat, she thought

about how that might change the sound when played back—if her screams would sound like they were echoing from underwater.

Then she threw herself sideways, nearly avoiding the swing of the butcher's knife.

It cut through her arm instead of her neck, but she didn't feel the pain. She felt the clay of the brick against her back, heard the whistle of the weapon through the air on repeat through her head even though the figure in front of her was now still, one eye bright like a flashlight through their hair.

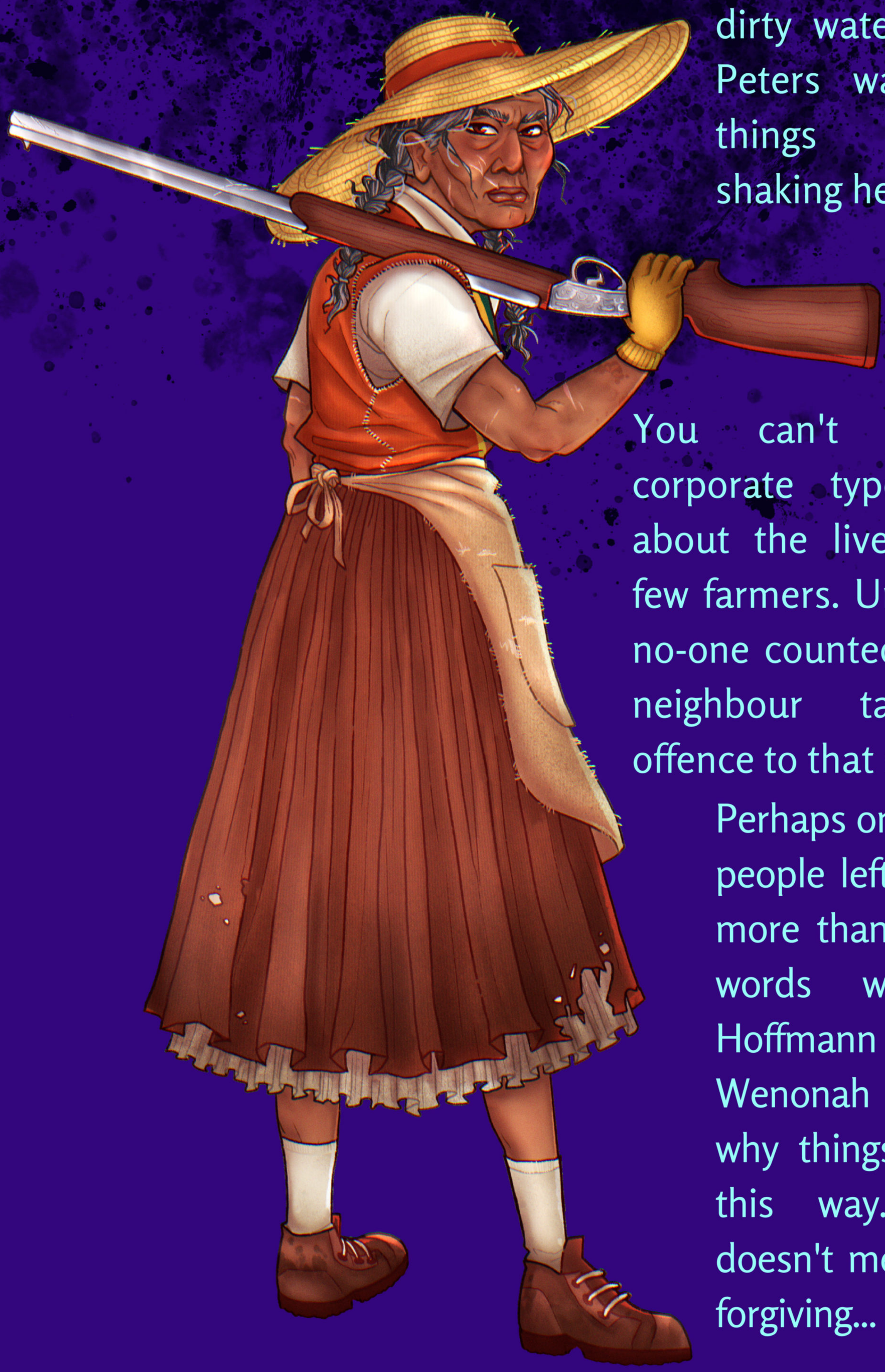
"What do you want?" she asked. The figure's mouth didn't move, but Hannah heard, again, that reedy pop. It was the only warning before the figure lunged, grabbing Hannah's arm and throwing her across the cellar floor.

They were between Hannah and the door, now, but her brain felt clear. She was fast, faster than the figure was. The door opened outwards. She just had to run—

She leaped upwards, throwing herself forward, her brain empty except for the pound of fear in her chest, and the figure swung—

Hannah's vision was only amber.

WENONAH PETERS is too old for this.



When the pigs over at the Hoffmann farm died drinking dirty water, Wenonah Peters was watching things play out, shaking her head.

You can't count on corporate types to care about the livelihood of a few farmers. Unfortunately, no-one counted on her old neighbour taking such offence to that simple fact.

Perhaps one of the only people left who shared more than a few short words with Bridget Hoffmann in life, Wenonah understands why things turned out this way. But that doesn't mean she feels forgiving...

WENONAH PETERS

Wenonah had always lived in the town of Cordes; she knew every invasive plant that dared make its way onto the farm, every predator that eyed the cattle from beyond the fence, and every fool stupid enough to stay in the godforsaken place longer than six months. So when she heard screams from the town up the road, she could only try to convince herself that it'd been a cougar that'd come down from the hills.

It hadn't been, of course. She knew that.

But the noise drew her outside all the same and in the early hours of the day, while the sun crept up the horizon, her eyes drifted in the opposite direction, down the road and towards the outskirts.

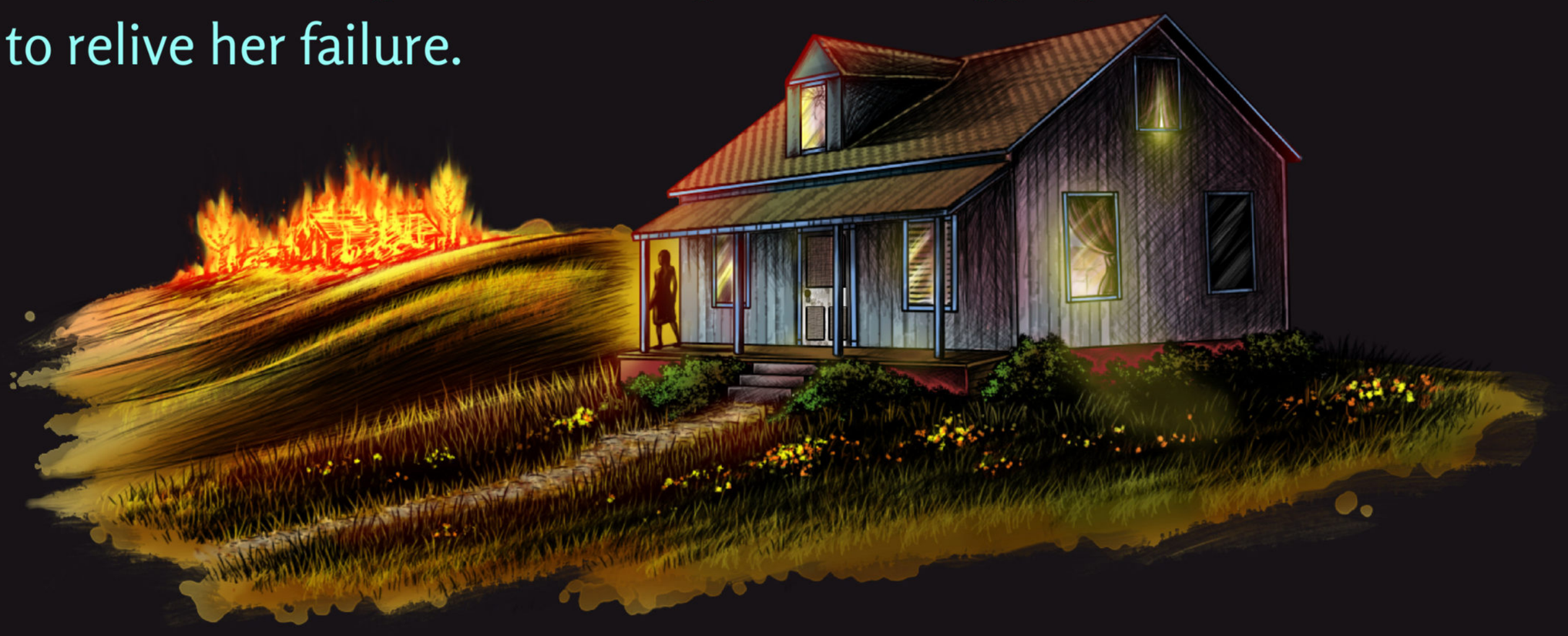
The truck was parked down the gravel drive, an old, beat up thing that had always served her well. She climbed into it now, shotgun in hand and a tightness in her chest. Gravel crunched beneath the tires. The world was silent now, the screams having died down and the normal buzz of crickets and wind blowing through the underbrush took its place. Wenonah wondered if she could pretend that she'd heard nothing at all.

"Coulda been cougars." But the words rang hollow even to her. It could have been a lot of things, but there *was* one thing. One thing she needed to check.

The road down to the farmstead was familiar, overgrown on each side with weeds and wild brush. She'd been driving down this way more recently, memories calling out to her on dark nights. She'd sit for hours, just staring at the old, hollowed out remains of the pig farm, thinking on it all.

She hoped it was like that, just bad thoughts, hearing the

screams of cougars in the night and dragging her down the road to relive her failure.



She hoped all the way there, up until she crested the hill and saw the body of Emmeline Howard pitched up with nails through her hands like a poor man's crucifix. The smell of rot and death hung heavy in the air and even from within her car she could smell it.

"Fucking shit, Hoffmann."

The dirt was soft beneath her shoes as she got out of the truck, holding a handkerchief over her mouth and nose in a vain attempt to keep the stench out. The child was freshly killed, her pale skin now an unseemly, mottled grey. Blood stained the wood of the post and Wenonah cringed back as the smell flooded her nostrils.

"Christ," she said, staring up at the body.

In her mind, she could still see them, the photos of their bodies covering the fronts of newspapers for weeks after the killings. The tragic story of a family of dead capitalists with a happy ending wrought by God's own righteous fury. Wenonah turned away from the rotting corpse, suddenly sick to her stomach.

She started back to the truck, a pit growing in her stomach. Just go home, she told herself, it's cougars, just go home.

"Just go home, Hoffmann."

Wenonah leaned out the window of her truck, 30 years younger and with an expression on her face that meant business.

"They ain't gonna listen to you. Folks like them don't give a shit about our livestock, you know that."

"Don't need 'em to listen none," was the stunted reply and Wenonah's brow furrowed.

That is, until her eyes landed on the knife in her hand, a big, nasty looking thing, held in a fist clenched so tight she was sure it'd be crushed under the weight. For a moment, Wenonah was quiet, just looking at the knife.

"You know they ain't gonna like that, Biddy. These town people, they hang on the apron strings of these corporate fascists like newborn babes. You won't get away with it."

"Not looking for your sage advice tonight, Peters. Get off home and mind your business."

Wenonah knew a dismissal when she heard one, and she knew Bridget Hoffmann well enough. The woman wasn't going to listen to reason. If God himself came down and told her not to do it, she'd walk right on by. So Wenonah only leveled her gaze, watching until Bridget finally met her eye.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Won't."

She turned the key in the ignition and pulled away, leaving Bridget on the road behind her, a pit growing in her stomach about the size of the one she had now.

The shotgun was heavy in her hands, heavier than it used to be but that didn't mean nothing, her aim was still good.

The charred remains of the old weather vane exploded with the impact of the bullet and behind her, across the road, a murder of crows took flight, screaming their surprise into the open sky. Wenonah sat herself down on the steps of the old building and waited, feeling, now more than ever, the weight of her age.

It didn't take long, with Hoffmann it never did. Wenonah remembered a time when Hoffmann had been off in town. A group of boys had been playing in the field and broke one of her first floor windows. Bridget had been on them not five seconds later and Wenonah had always wondered how she'd got home so fast. A smile crept up her face at the memory, even as shadows began to lick their way up the road, over the truck, down the drive and to the stairs.

The sound of gravel crunching under boots had her pushing herself up off the steps.

"Knew you'd come running, Hoffmann."

The figure that stood before her was silent and the smell of burnt skin and blood rolled off them in waves. Wenonah couldn't tell if the tears that pricked at the corner of her eyes came from

the stench or from the sight of what her friend had become. The shotgun was held limply in her hand, and she looked up, craning her neck as she always had done, to look into their face.

"What're you doing, Biddy?" Her voice was tight, with anger and desperation, "It was over, they finished it! It's all done, why couldn't you see that!?"

The creature that had been Bridget Hoffmann said nothing, only stared down at her from behind a curtain of dark hair. Despite her despair, Wenonah's lips curled up into a sneer and she hefted the shotgun up into her arms.

"Why didn't you listen to me, for God's sake!? Nothing came of it the last time and nothing'll come of it now. You shoulda stayed buried."

Wenonah felt the cold steel slide through her stomach the moment she pulled the trigger. The shotgun fell from her hands and clattered to the ground as she staggered back, Hoffmann's knife stuck through her gut, the same knife she'd had that night. Wenonah would have laughed at that, if she hadn't been gasping for her breath.

Her knees hit the ground and in that moment, all she knew was pain. Hoffmann's boots swam in and out of her vision and with what little strength she had, she grabbed hold of them as blood poured from her wound.

"They got you—the last time—they'll get you—again." She could barely breathe. "Don't say—I didn't—warn you."

There was only darkness now and the thick, acrid stench of her own blood. Nothing else, as she collapsed into the dirt, nothing at all except a low, familiar voice.

"Won't."

HELLEN BRIAR lives for lucky breaks.

For as long as she's been alive, Hellen has had luck on her side, and she'd hate to lose that now.

Heiress to an impressive ranch inheritance, Hellen and the rest of the Briars keep their eye on Cordes from outside. It's unfortunate she's even in town today, and misfortune isn't like her.

The problem with relying on something for so long is that, when the situation shifts, you might struggle to survive without what you know. And you know what? It's time to see if the will of a rancher is strong enough to overcome a stinking heap of pig farmer, with or without a little help from some lucky tokens.

HELLEN BRIAR

She didn't recognize the body. This disturbed Hellen, not because she was kneeling next to a corpse, but because she couldn't recall the name attached to the person the body once was. It was a fact of life in Cordes that everyone knew everyone. Small towns breed familiarity even in passing.

She tried to reason with herself, rationalizing that the once person was just new to town, or only passing through momentarily. She should recognize those even afflicted by death. Maybe it was the mutilation, the viscera that covered the walls and distracted the eye. The skin was in ribbons, a dark oozing red that obscured whatever color it once held. She hoped it wasn't a personal failing that she could no longer tell what were the eyes and what was the mouth.

In any case, she had accomplished her goal in town. Her father had asked her to figure out if the rumors of a "commotion" were true, and she supposed this was answer enough. She couldn't get back to the ranch fast enough.

Hellen let her fingertips brush the tokens at her side, stealing a small moment of comfort. She had taken her family's responsibility on her shoulders for the past two decades. This she could handle. Ever since she was a young girl, she had a knack for finding luck. It had started when she went rabbit hunting around the house, carrying her small .22 rifle over her shoulder. She had ended up in the cemetery on the hill, where the deceased of her line had always been buried. The cemetery wasn't anything special. It had simple, clean gravestones that nestled between the cactus and sagebrush. She had crept along the narrow gravel path, eyes locked on the jack rabbit sitting next to the white granite of

Aunt Maria's resting place. She had taken her time, slowed her breath, and easily killed the rabbit and taken it home. Her grandfather had been impressed by the hunt, and afterwards showed her how to preserve its foot, so that she may have some of its luck for her own. He told her the trick to preservation was 20 Mule Team Borax. She remembered that now.

Since then, she had a knack for collecting lucky tokens. The two playing cards, aces punched through and tied to her belt, were gained after a good game of poker where she won ten dollars from her uncle at Thanksgiving dinner. The small leather pouch holding a smooth pebble was a gift from her brother Daniel, who claimed it had skipped all the way to the other side of the creek near the county road. Her belt contained dried flowers and woven bands and all kinds of trinkets, and yet none were as important to her superstition as that first rabbit's foot. It soothed her. She knew that as long as she had luck on her side, things would go her way.

She lingered at the body for a moment longer then stood, determined to head back to the ranch and figure out the next course of action. As she turned around, she noticed a shadow lingering on the wall, courtesy of the early morning sunlight. It was large and indistinct, a great malformed beast that formed from the inky blackness. Hellen could not tell what animal the shadow belonged to but knew from the sheer size of it that it would not be wise to stay around to find out. The shade crept further along the wall and Hellen gently stepped back, careful to avoid the puddles of blood on the floor.

A ragged snort broke through the fragile morning silence,

sending Hellen stumbling towards the door as it came into view.

It was not alive. How could it be, with its guts spilling out the side and its eyes dark and glassy. Flies buzzed around the head, picking at its rotten flesh. One landed on a milky eyeball, buzzing slightly as the creature failed to blink. The tension became suffocating as it crashed into the room, knocking over shelves and mixing in its own entrails with that of the unrecognized corpse. It was a pig, she thought. The rotten corpse of a pig.

Hellen froze, stifling her breath as she found a place to hide from view. She just needed to find a way to make it to the door without catching the beast's attention. It snorted as its head lurched to the floor, bathing its snout in the pool of blood. The snuffling continued as Hellen slowly crawled to the door. She tried to rationalize the situation in her head, to come up with an explanation of why now she would be caught in such a scenario. Surely her rabbit's foot would protect her. She would not become another body to stain the floor.

The door was so close now, only about three strides away. She carefully brought herself up from the ground, feeling only the slightest tug on her side as it caught on a nearby shelf. With a sharp pull, Hellen sprinted to the door, closing the distance to her escape. The pig brought its head up with a snap, and she heard the beast begin its pursuit as she threw open the door.

She slammed it shut as she passed through, not pausing in her pace as she heard a monstrous form ram into the door full force. Her old battered truck sat in wait at the end of the parking lot, only a short sprint away. She was determined to make it and leave this place to wallow in its own misfortune.

Hellen reached the car in a gasp of breath, then frantically grabbed the keys from her pocket. She once again drifted her hand

to her side, to thank the luck that had been granted to her in this moment. This time, her hand caught empty air. Her heart stuttered as she stopped in her tracks. The extended hand lay frozen, unable to deal with the absence of what had always been there. In a burst, she grasped her belt, tearing at her pants and checking every pocket. They had to be here, they had to. Her tokens were as integral a part to her as her soul, how could they abandon her now?

She heard the pig scream as the realization finally hit. Her luck was gone. There was no hope for her now.

Hellen collapsed to the ground, kneeling in front of her car door, the keys clutched in her hand. She didn't move to open it or get inside. Escape was no longer in her reach.

She didn't notice the soft, thudding footsteps that carried across the empty parking lot. She didn't notice the sharp sound of metal sliding against the truck, carving a long warning in its side. She never saw the person behind her as they raised a knife to the sky, the blade glinting in the early morning sun.

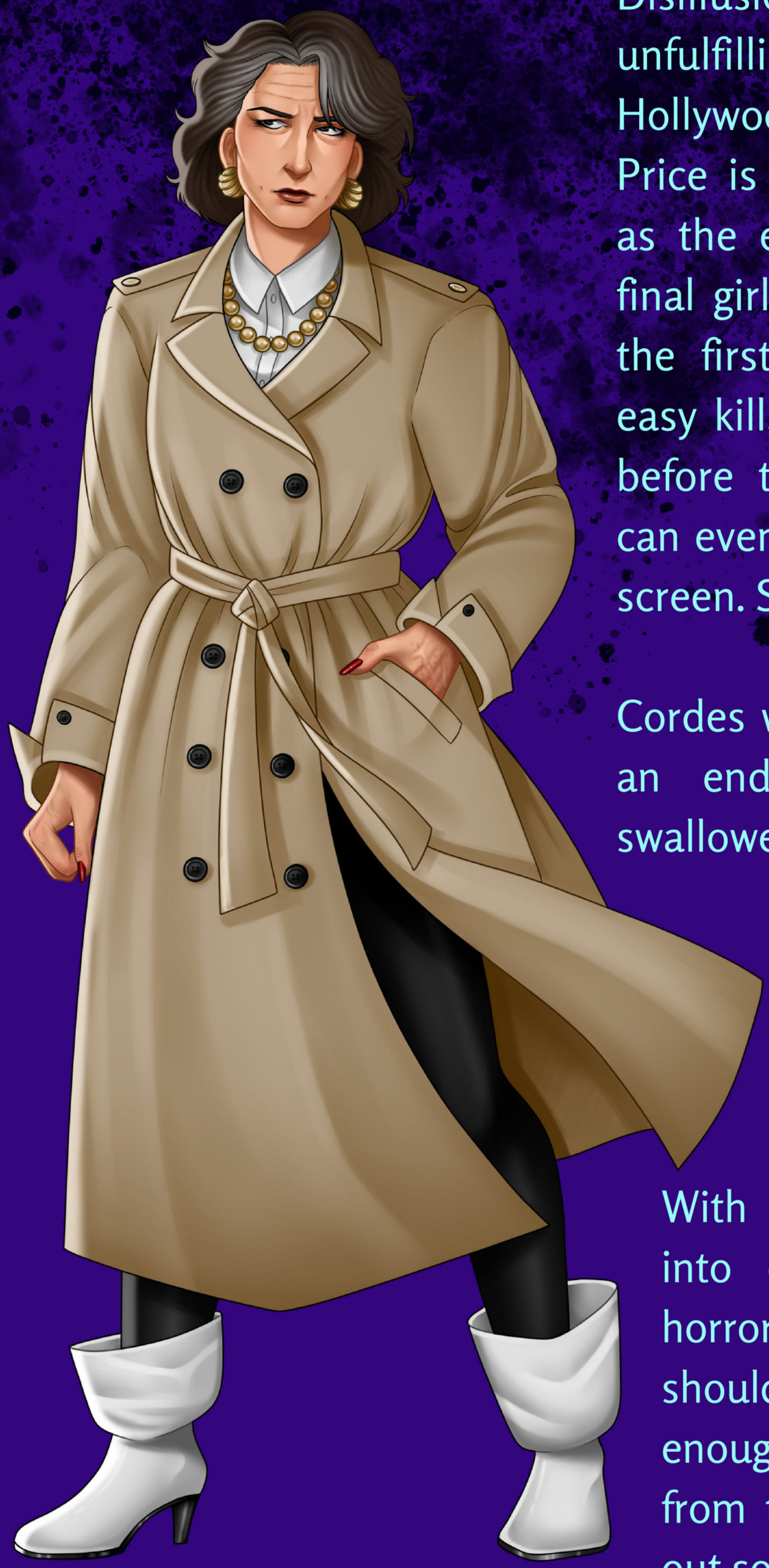
Hellen died with a knife in her back, her entrails ripped out and left discarded. As her blood seeped into the pavement, Hellen wondered if anyone would recognize her body.

She hoped they would. Maybe she would be lucky enough for that.

SUNDAY

LATE MORNING

CORDELIA PRICE plays the victim.



Disillusioned by a long and unfulfilling career as a Hollywood hopeful, Cordelia Price is used to being cast as the exact opposite of a final girl. In her films, she's the first to go. Always an easy kill, drowning in blood before the opening credits can even splatter across the screen. She's sick of it.

Cordes was supposed to be an end to a series of swallowed dreams, a spot to stop and lick her wounds. Instead, someone's started rubbing in the salt.

With the world turning into one of her hated horror movies, does this should-be starlet know enough to save herself from the fate she's acted out so many times before?

CORDELIA PRICE

The blood Cordelia had covered herself in was beginning to reek. The Watering Hole—Cordes café and bar, the only one for dozens of miles—was a mess. It was a home once, hip-roofed and with a tiny porch in the front, painted a deep dark blue, until it was gutted, and converted into an eatery.

There were still a few aching signs of The Watering Hole's old life—a slapdash section of tortoiseshell green, light fixtures in strange places, and most importantly, a small upstairs section too expensive to renovate.

It was there, hip cocked against the railing, keeping watch with stray glances, that Cordelia rummaged through the huge lost and found bin, hoping for something discarded, overlooked, that could help.

The soft piles of old forgotten jackets, hats and, bizarrely, a pair of boxers, eventually yielded to the hard plastic of water bottles and canteens. Cordelia needed the largest canteen she could find if she wanted any chance of escaping the hell hole this town had become. *The desert is a bitch and she'll kill you dead without remorse* suddenly popped into her head, the drawl of it as clear and thick as that rare safety briefing on set had been, all those years ago.

She shook her head, chunky earrings swaying, there was no time for *reminiscing*. The nostalgia soaked fugue of the five months since her *retirement* and move to Cordes had been gutted and flayed with the squealing of pigs and schlick of a knife.

There was a surprising selection of containers at the bottom of the bin. The name tag on one stopped her, the dried blood on her hands dyeing the edges a sickly brown.

Kev.

Just Kev, in thick sharpie, and a few peeling stickers from bands that he was not nearly sophisticated enough to actually enjoy. The bottle sloshed with leftover liquid. Vodka.

Kev hadn't seemed like the kind of boy to take anything very seriously, bored and already tired of small-town life. Except for movies.

Cordelia's movies, specifically, which he had asked her about with the fervour of a fanatic, eyes wide and wet and serious when she had been nice enough to sign the poster of her fifth film — a real dud of a background performance if she was honest — for him. He'd even asked her to pose in front of The Watering Hole's poster of her first film. He was the only one who had recognized her so far.

It had almost been enough to remind her why she loved being in movies in the first place.

But it didn't matter anymore. Kev was dead, she'd seen it with her own eyes, watched from the sidewalk as the monster split him open from throat to crotch, his guts spilling out, blood so thick it dyed them black—black as the intestines of the VHS tapes she'd pulled out just before all this madness, one after the other in a fit of rage about her career, until they unspooled into a pile of mutilation and unfulfilled promises.

Suddenly, there was a wet snuffling sound. Cordelia struggled to swallow with sudden fear.

Carefully, she held her breath, craning her neck slowly. One of the zombie pigs was down on the first floor, sniffling at the caved in head of the bartender, lapping at the gore of his brains. It was calm, exploratory. It wasn't searching for her.

Shakily, Cordelia let her breath out from between her teeth. The blood trick was still working. She'd learned it in her eighth film, a 'true' story about a serial killer, that one of the girls had escaped his pigs by covering herself in the other victim's blood so she wouldn't smell alive. Cordelia had memorized all of those facts, even though in the film she died first.

It had always been like that. She puffed up every auteur director, made friends with every lead, kept her chin up, deferred politely, swallowed down her rage every time her agent promised her 'next time, next time, next time' she'd be the final girl.

But thirty years and almost as many films later had taught her otherwise. Cordelia was always first. Sometimes the whore, sometimes the girl next door, sometimes the virgin for irony, then later the mother when she was the ripe old age of thirty. Always first.

She refused to be first again, in this town that was supposed to be away from it all.

There'd been a strange energy to the town on Saturday, but

Cordelia hadn't known what it was until, walking past Kev's house in the dark of the night, she had watched his murder. The monster had zigzagged through the neighbourhood, leaving a wake of shattered corpses.

Cordelia hadn't run that hard in years, slipping on the slick pavement to the inhuman screams of pigs, rushing into one of the desecrated houses where she crawled into the blood and viscera, picking her way across town, renewing the blood at each massacre site. She would not die first. Not this time. Even if it meant someone else had to.

The memories rushed out of Cordelia's brain when her hand knocked against an honest to goodness survival canteen, light and large, the kind that had a built in water purifier, something a hiker must've lost years ago—

At the same time, a second pig joined his sister, looking for something to eat. They squealed at the sound.

The two creatures snarled, beginning to pace, rearing up with the knowledge that Cordelia was there. She slowly tightened her fingers over the canteen, inching toward the railing to watch the pigs, until she could settle the strap over her shoulder.

Just had to find water now.

The pigs bayed, one of them headbutting the table, stomping the body of a bus boy to paste.

Right. They couldn't see her. Pigs couldn't look up, they didn't have the proper musculature in their necks.

Cordelia nearly sagged against the railing as the pigs scampered off towards the door.

Pigs couldn't look up.

The monster could.

It moved in a blink, there in a flash right where the pigs had

been, grinning with delicious mania. Their hand twitched, the knife glinting off the early morning sun streaming in through the cafe windows.

A gasp. And they were on the stairs.

Cordelia slid her foot back, felt herself stumble, hands reaching for polished wood.

The monster was closer still, steam huffing out of their nose with every necrotic breath.

They smiled, the single eye that was visible under the pig mask glinting, tongue lolling out. This was a chase, a hunt, and they were the apex predator.

It was a look Cordelia knew well, the same she had seen for years, on every producer's face, every male director that had the power to refuse her anything more than table scraps, the same arrogance of every bully she had ever faced in the ugliness of Hollywood.

The thing about arrogant monsters, the thing she had only learned in the hindsight of this tiny town, was that any sort of emotion fed them. Crying. Anger. Pleas for empathy, begging. It all was the same to them, just more energy to feed on.

The monster lunged, a guttural hunting howl flying from their frothing mouth.

The only thing to do when faced with such arrogance was to build a wall—

And run.

In the last possible moment, the knife close enough to knick the golden pearls Cordelia wore around her neck, she twisted, and threw herself over the railing.

The monster, charging with too much momentum, smashed clean through, and toppled after.

Cordelia hit one of the tables below with a meaty thud, but she stood. Her ankle roared, but held. She was bruised, but unbroken. She had done her own stunts exactly once—this pain was even worse than that.

Cordelia was getting too old for this.

The monster groaned. The table was shattered beneath it, and when it tried to move, the wood cracked. A phlegmy growl rolled out its mouth as it tried to stand, knife dug into the floor so deeply it struggled to pull the instrument loose.

Cordelia wasted only a single moment as she limped her way to freedom; she peeled the poster of her first movie clean off the wall with a satisfied nod.

CARMEN RAMÍREZ-SAGAYSAY has seen enough.

Always the wrong place and the wrong time for Carmen, a woman who would prefer to step out of the spotlight even in her better moments.

Life could have been kinder. It could have been fairer. It damn well wasn't, and she's taken each new knock on the chin, the way she was taught. All she asks for is a quiet life, and even that seems to be too much.

As a new day rises, as bodies lie cooking in the desert sun and a killer keeps coming, Carmen can only do her best to put the beast to rest. One outsider against another, a good heart against a rotten husk. And only room for one winner in the final round...

CARMEN RAMÍREZ-SAGAYSAY

As a rule, Carmen didn't turn down local jobs. If she could haul a shipment to its destination and still visit her parents for Sunday lunch, it was fair game. But runs as a suicide jockey set her teeth on edge. It wasn't the danger—it was that gas stunk like her worst memories.

But that soft spot for Isaiah always made her bite her tongue and haul ass in a rolling refinery.

Isaiah. *Shit*. The guy had stood by her since they were in grade school, unwavering even when people had declared *her* delusional. How do you pay a debt to a dead man?

Improvise, adapt, and overcome. The marines had never taught her how to deal with pain, but they had taught her this. Be and do whatever the moment needs.

She knew it was coming even before the thunderclaps of a fight broke out in The Watering Hole. Unlike her Lolo, who had felt storms coming, her sixth sense was exclusively for moments like this.

A bloated puddle of gasoline surrounded most of the gas station and crept towards the main strip, saturating the air with its cloying stench. Carmen flipped the tanker's last lever and rushed toward The Watering Hole, leaving the last few thousand gallons to surge across the ground. She patted down her pockets one last time, fingers gliding over the road flares hidden beneath worn denim.

The bar doors flew open to a battered Cordelia hobbling to safety. There was something grimly funny about the spectacle of it all—the way it twisted the most unremarkable of Cordes life until it bled. Any other day saw them gathering dust in the bar: Cordelia

sipping wine through a straw while tolerating Kev's chatter; Carmen hiding in the back corner booth, contemplating life over a forty in solitude.

Carmen let her pass without acknowledgement. She was alive and leaving, and Carmen had a job to do.

Armed combat wasn't anything new for her. Neither was fighting for her life. It sure as hell was a better motivator for violence than the dubious honor of being an 'American patriot.'

However. It was less than ideal to engage the enemy with only a baseball bat. Chancla was never used for anything besides checking tire pressure and scaring off truck stop creeps.

The doors of The Watering Hole pushed open a second time. Slowly. Its hinges screeched. Someone stepped outside, letting the doors fall shut behind them with another scream of expired metal.

Isaiah had always called it—the thing Miss Hoffmann became—a monster.

This grotesque, person-shaped abomination had always existed somewhere inside her, even back when they first met, when Carmen was the kid with a crew cut who hid an old butterfly knife and stolen eyeliner in the tube of her sock.

The Miss Hoffmann who gave her a few bucks each week for helping out around the farm was the same Miss Hoffmann who murdered the Andersons.

Carmen could appreciate that. The Carmen who ate lunch with her parents and brothers every Sunday, who spoke crappy Spanish and crappier Filipino, was the same Carmen who flew off to Vietnam with a gun in her hands and a lighter in her pocket.

All human beings have monsters inside of them.

After the war, she had slain hers, put it to rest with all the other

parts that weren't really her.

She could slay this one, too.

She charged. A shudder rippled through the creature and it sprang forward in a dead sprint. Carmen swung Chancla out wide, wood cracking hard against the creature's ribs. It didn't make a sound, barely reacted to the thud of impact. A gleam of steel was the only warning before its knife came slicing through the air. Carmen jerked away, her dog tags clattering with the same racket as bullet casings spitting through the air.

The monster drove forward, its luminous eye fixed on her and unblinking. Carmen smashed it in the thigh, the arm, and still it kept pursuing. The knife flashed again and again. Lines ripped through her skin. Chancla was bitten away in pieces.

The earlier gush of fuel from the tanker had shriveled into a thin stream and every attack kicked up a splatter of gasoline. Fumes hung heavy over their heads and on her tongue. Each breath was ragged thunder in her ears. Blood ran warm and sticky over her skin.

This time, when the creature lunged, Carmen flung the remains of her bat aside. Her body moved like it had been trained to—a toy soldier wound up and let loose.

One arm contorted around the monster's knife-arm, the second curled over the back of its head, fingers tangled in a fistful of matted hair. Her gaze locked with the creature's and it leered back at her. Carmen felt something hot and ugly writhe in her belly. She wrenched the creature by the skull and slammed it to the ground with a splash of gasoline.

It should've been enough to stun someone, but this thing thrashed beneath her grip. The hand on the knife had barely slackened. She was stomping on the monster's neck before she'd

even decided to do it. Her body did what it was taught and the blade clattered to the ground in a twitch of fingers.

That'd have to be enough.

Carmen spun as fast as she could in the sea of gasoline and took off.

Her body was straining; her lungs struggled desperately for life as they choked on putrid air, and her heartbeat pounded in her blood. The world around her began singing around the edges, a photo dropped in a fire. She strained her eyes, desperate to make sense of the world stretching long and wobbly ahead of her. As she raced into the darkness, bits of her crumbled away, drowning beneath the crash of each step. All around her, the air reeked, thick with vapors that mutated, no longer gasoline but something else.

Sensations can become a part of a person. The film of skin peeling away from the roof of a seared mouth might mean nothing, or it could mean everything, if that eye-watering pain came from the tamales fed to you by your grandmother moments before she dropped dead. Memories could live in the body just as much as in the mind.

The mouth—tamales; the numb slime of wet, ruined skin; and 'Ita, dead on the floor of her kitchen, her paisley oven mitts still on.

The left foot—the sparkle of shattered glass; the prod and tug of needle nose tweezers as her father removed shards bright with a rainbow of Christmas lights. *Pobrecito, no llores. ¡Eres un chico fuerte!*

The nose—

Fire. Jungle. Lush, humid, hot. People who didn't look all that different from her mother.

The stink of napalm.

‘Nam.

She lit a road flare as she ran, and turned to see the jungle behind her, calm like it always was before an ambush. Flames spewed from the road flare clenched in her steady hand. Its unwelcome heat pulsed over her skin, relentless and unpleasantly familiar.

One last monster. One last fire.

She threw with every ounce of strength she had left.

The flare barely kissed the glassy surface before the blaze ripped across the station, smothering everything in its path. Billowing plumes of smoke climbed the sky, crowding over Cordes like rubberneckers at the sight of an horrific accident.

Everything in Carmen wanted to keep running, to never be in a place filled with fire again, but her mission wasn’t complete.

Through the haze, she could just see the shadow of a person. No, not a person, a monster. On its feet and tearing towards her through the fire, even as the flames consumed it.

She gritted her teeth and braced for impact.

A flash of light seared through her retinas, bleaching out the gas station, the creature, and all of Cordes. Her breath caught in her throat. A fireball devoured the gas station, blasting her away into the street. Finally, the tanker had made its last delivery.

Vision swimming and ears ringing, Carmen staggered to her feet. The fire had spread with the explosion, covering the main strip, glowing as it gorged.

She stared into the fire, waiting. Watching.

But nothing ever came out.

Everything just burned.

One last fire. One last monster.

She was gonna make it to Sunday lunch after all.

EPILOGUE

Watching the pigs wail and gasp in the dead grass as they collapsed had closed a cold hand of hatred around her heart, one that never again loosened its grip.

The shrieks of poisoned pigs replaying in her head, she'd sought out the sonofabitch who OKed the industrial expansion. The shitbag who fought her at town meetings, who called her farm archaic. Anderson. She stabbed him in the gut, ground the knife in rough, and was still entirely animated by anger. He didn't squeal as sadly as her animals. Neither did the wife. The kids got close.

She had drifted home in a daze, the human parts already cut out for the offal bin. Carried on the routine with dead animals stinking up the soil, shaking, but nothing else to do. Then the crowd came.

They wanted answers, but she wouldn't go outside. Wouldn't even look. Crowd and killer had something in common then, that cold anger, as dozens of hands set the farmhouse on fire.

She felt the flames, before the numbness took over. And then, even after she got up again, stinking and skeletal, the numbness never left. There was no Hoffmann anymore. No more confusion, but the anger... the anger didn't go anywhere.

Her spirit surrendered at the first stab, but the body was suspended by rage so strong it didn't know how to die. The first fire had failed to finish the job, but this time - the pigs, part of the same organism, stiffen and plop into piles of pink flesh broken up by bones - these flames were warm and welcome. A flicker of Bridget returning, feels the comfort of the farmhouse's fireplace. The first memory outside the massacre since Cordes set her on the pyre.

Bridget, herself for a bright and brilliant second, is blasted into bits with arms wide open to face her fate.

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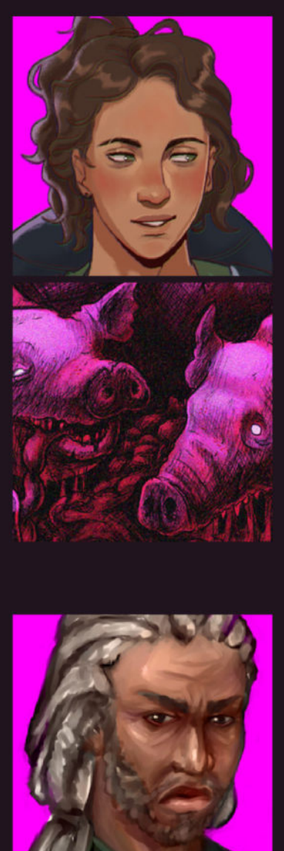

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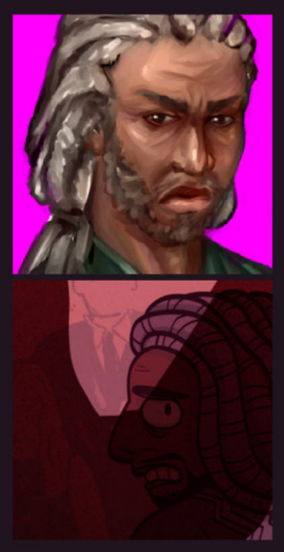

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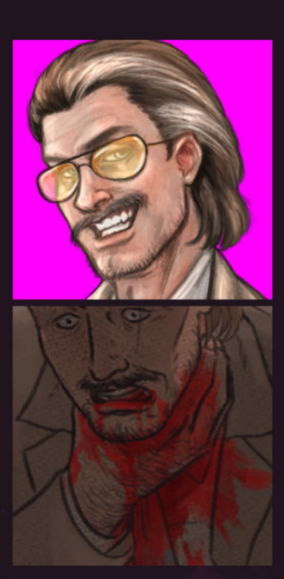

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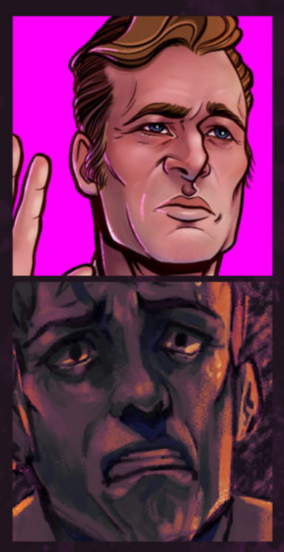

"Uncle" Sam Henderson (p28)

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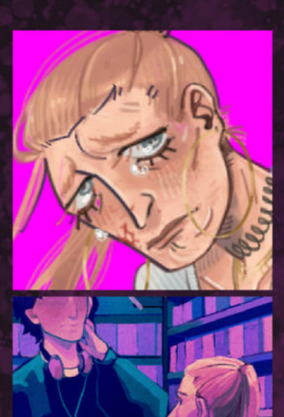

Sarah Hughes (p34)

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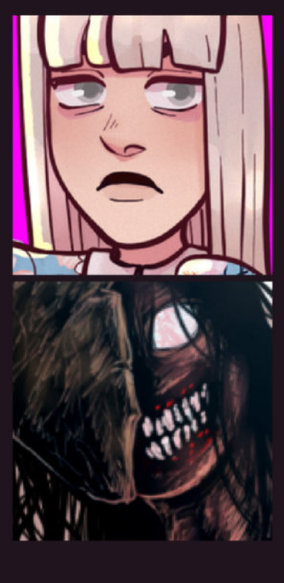

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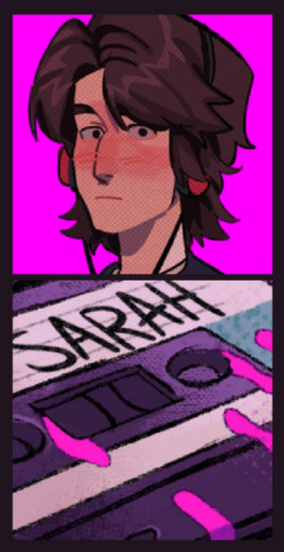

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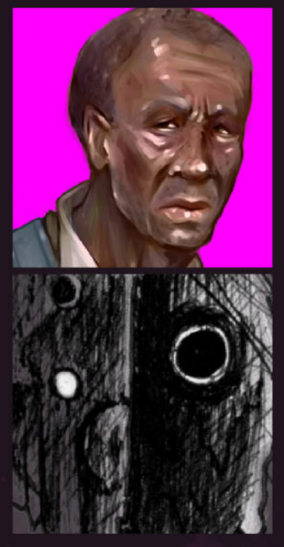

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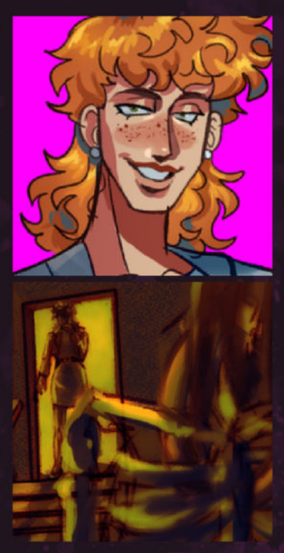

Hannah Sackler (p62)

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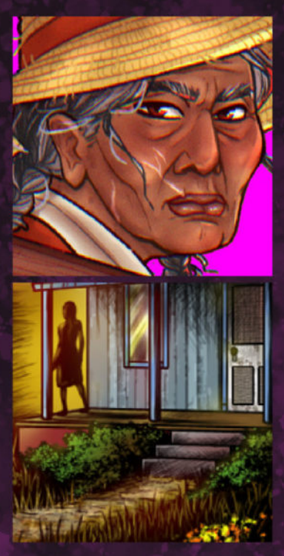

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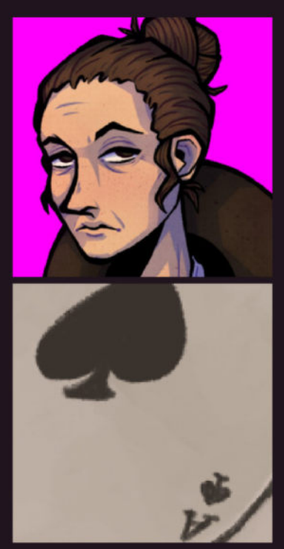

Hellen Briar (p74)

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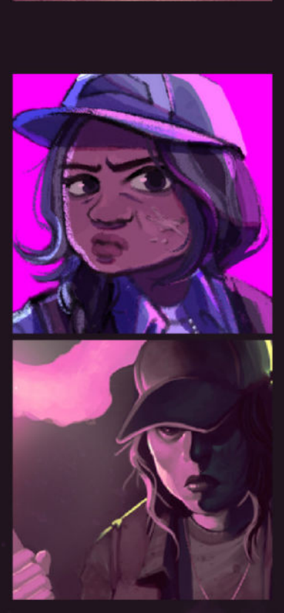

Carmen Ramírez-Sagaysay (p87)

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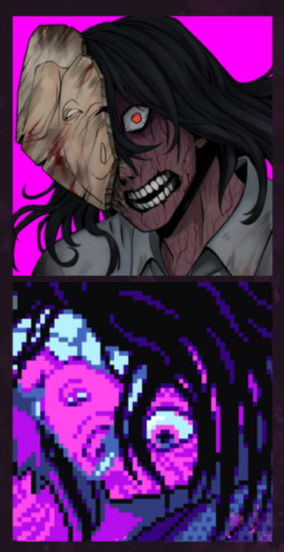

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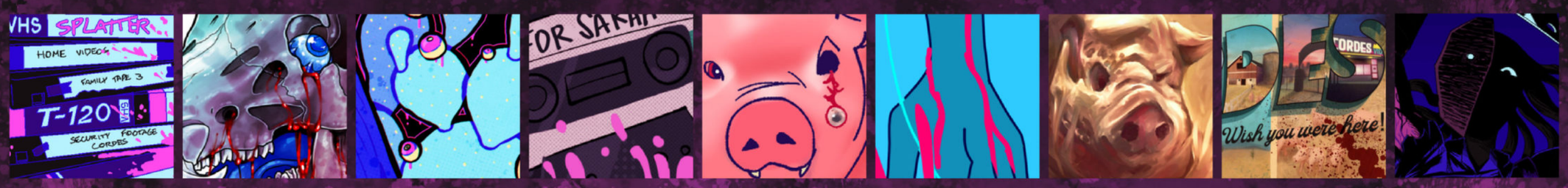
Wallpapers: WretcheDelights / TheCoffeeRain / Aveloka



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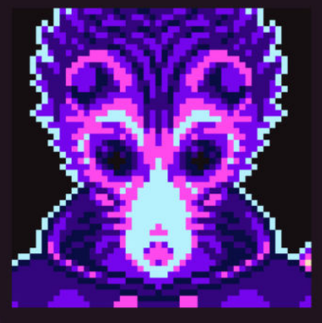

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